

Integrating Adult Education and Career and Technical Education under Hostile Institutional Leadership: Faculty Strategies for Protecting Students and Programs

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Abstract

In many colleges and universities, efforts to modernize Career and Technical Education (CTE) and adult education collide with institutional cultures that are resistant, politicized, or openly hostile. Faculty who attempt to align programs with contemporary standards, licensure requirements, and adult learning principles may encounter procedural obstruction, misrepresentation of policy, and top-down decisions that undermine student success. This article examines how integration of adult education and CTE can still move forward under hostile leadership, drawing on andragogical theory, lifelong learning, and faculty governance traditions. The discussion centers on three interrelated strategies: (a) grounding curricular integration in external standards and accreditation frameworks, (b) designing coherent pathways that make adult learners' needs visible and non-negotiable, and (c) exercising collective faculty agency to resist noncompliant or harmful models while documenting student impact. Rather than offering a simple "how-to" recipe, the article highlights tensions between institutional politics and professional ethics, and argues that faculty in adult and CTE contexts have a duty to protect learners and the public interest even when doing so is uncomfortable or risky. Implications are offered for faculty leaders, unions, accreditors, and administrators who seek to support robust, integrated adult and CTE pathways in environments where leadership is unstable or misaligned with educational values.

Keywords

Adult Education, Career and Technical Education, Faculty Governance, Hostile Leadership, Accreditation, Program Integration

1. Introduction

Adult education and Career and Technical Education (CTE) are critical sites where institutions translate abstract commitments—equity, workforce readiness, lifelong learning—into concrete pathways for real learners. In many systems, adult and CTE programs are framed as key engines for economic mobility, especially for working adults, first-generation students, and learners from historically marginalized communities (Soliz, 2023; Urban Institute, 2022). Policy initiatives such as Integrated Education and Training (IET) and career pathways models explicitly position adult basic skills, English language instruction, and technical preparation as mutually reinforcing rather than separate tracks (Mortrude, 2017).

Definitions and scope. In this article, Adult Education refers to organized instruction for adults that focuses on basic skills, literacy, English language learning, high school equivalency preparation, and related lifelong-learning supports, often delivered through community colleges, adult schools, community-based programs, and workforce systems. Career and Technical Education (CTE) refers to occupationally focused education and training designed to build technical and professional competencies leading to employment, advancement, and industry-recognized credentials. Although several regulatory and accreditation examples are drawn from California educator preparation and regional accreditation as a concrete illustration, the analysis is intended to be broadly applicable: most states and countries operate comparable licensure, quality assurance, and accreditation frameworks that shape program design and public accountability.

At the same time, adult and CTE programs operate within a rapidly shifting environment. States and systems are tightening expectations around “college and career readiness”, adding career-focused indicators to accountability systems, and emphasizing completion of industry-recognized credentials (Advance CTE et al., 2025; CTE Research Network, 2024). In principle, these pressures can support thoughtful integration: aligning adult education and CTE structures so learners encounter coherent pathways, transparent expectations, and stackable credentials. In practice, however, faculty who design and teach in adult and CTE programs often face not only the usual constraints of time and resources, but also hostile institutional leadership—deans, chairs, or other administrators who resist change, disregard external standards, or view adult and CTE programs as expendable.

Hostility in this sense is not limited to overt conflict. Research on toxic and destructive leadership in educational organizations describes patterns in which leaders’ behaviors systematically undermine organizational health, suppress dissent, and block mission-aligned change (Dunaway, 2014; Xie & Freeman, 2024). In higher education, department chairs and deans occupy a particularly complex middle space: they are expected to manage conflict and support innovation, yet may themselves become sources of resistance when they lack content knowledge or feel threatened by faculty-driven reforms (Gmelch et al., 2023; Marcus, 2021). For adult and CTE faculty, this can manifest as blocked proposals, arbitrary denials, or persistent pressure to maintain noncompliant program models that are

misaligned with licensure and accreditation requirements.

This article is concerned with those contexts: institutions where adult education and CTE faculty are trying to integrate programs in ways that align with contemporary standards, but encounter leadership that is indifferent or actively hostile to that work. The focus is not on personality conflicts but on structures and practices: noncompliant program models, misaligned catalog and web language, conflation of distinct standards (e.g., adult education vs. CTE foundations), and decision-making that prioritizes administrative convenience over learner welfare and legal obligations.

Integration, in this discussion, has three dimensions. First, it is pedagogical: drawing on andragogical principles to design learning that is problem-centered, experience-based, and responsive to adult learners' goals (Knowles et al., 2015). Second, it is structural: aligning course sequences, credit structures, and credential requirements so that adult basic skills, general education, and technical content form clear, stackable pathways rather than fragmented experiences (Mortrude, 2017; Soliz, 2023). Third, it is governance-based: ensuring that program decisions reflect the primary responsibility of faculty for curriculum, subject matter, and methods of instruction, as articulated in longstanding statements on shared governance (AAUP, n.d.; Linton, 2021).

These dimensions are under strain. Nationally, there are visible shifts in the balance of governance, with boards, legislatures, and senior administrators seeking greater control over curriculum, academic freedom, and faculty senates (Learn & Work Ecosystem Library, 2024). In some systems, faculty bodies have been redefined as advisory-only or dissolved altogether, weakening the very mechanisms through which adult and CTE faculty might contest harmful decisions. Within this broader environment, local patterns of hostile leadership can quickly convert structural tension into concrete harm: higher-unit requirements that delay completion, misaligned course plans that confuse candidates, and catalog language that obscures the actual standards-aligned pathways being taught on the ground.

Yet faculty are not powerless. Adult education and CTE have deep traditions of practitioner leadership: instructors and coordinators who design programs in partnership with communities, employers, and learners, often ahead of formal policy (Knowles et al., 2015; Mortrude, 2017). Integrated models such as IET were initially driven by practitioners responding to real adults' needs for simultaneous skill-building and credential attainment before being codified in federal legislation like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Mortrude, 2017). Similarly, contemporary CTE research highlights the importance of program design choices—such as advising, employer partnerships, and contextualized instruction—in shaping student outcomes (CTE Research Network, 2024; Urban Institute, 2022).

The tension, then, is not between faculty and “the institution” in the abstract, but between faculty who are attempting to enact these integrated, evidence-informed designs and leaders whose actions or omissions obstruct that work. In

some cases, hostile leadership may stem from ideological opposition to certain fields; in others, from a narrow budgetary logic that treats adult and CTE programs as peripheral. Whatever the source, the effect is to place faculty in an ethical bind: comply with noncompliant structures that harm students and undermine public trust, or resist and risk retaliation.

This article takes that ethical bind seriously and asks how faculty can navigate it without abandoning either their students or their professional responsibilities. The central guiding question is:

How can faculty advance integrated, compliant adult and CTE pathways when institutional leadership is obstructive or actively hostile?

From this, three more specific research questions follow:

- 1) How do adult education and CTE faculty conceptualize the integration of their programs in environments characterized by hostile or resistant leadership?
- 2) What strategies do these faculty use to align program structures with external standards and licensure requirements despite administrative obstruction or misrepresentation?
- 3) How do patterns of hostile leadership shape the experiences of adult and CTE learners, and what forms of faculty agency and collective action emerge in response?

Methodological note. This is a conceptual article that integrates (a) a targeted review of scholarship on adult learning, CTE pathways, shared governance, and destructive leadership; (b) document analysis of publicly available standards and accreditation guidance; and (c) reflective synthesis of the author's institutional experiences as an adult/CTE faculty member involved in curriculum, advising, and governance. The institutional examples are used illustratively to surface mechanisms of obstruction and student impact; they are not presented as generalizable case-study evidence, and readers should interpret them as context-dependent instances within a broader conceptual argument.

In what follows, I outline relevant theoretical lenses, describe common patterns of hostile leadership in adult and CTE contexts, and propose strategies for integration that center on students, standards, and faculty agency rather than administrative preference. While the examples draw on specific institutional experiences, the analysis is intended to speak more broadly to faculty, unions, accreditors, and policymakers who are confronting similar tensions in adult and CTE programs across systems.

2. Conceptual Framework: Adult Education, CTE, and Faculty Governance

Adult education and Career and Technical Education (CTE) share several foundational commitments: responsiveness to labor-market realities, recognition of learners' prior experience, and a focus on practical, transferable skills. Both domains aim to support adults in navigating economic change, reskilling, and advancing in work and civic life (Boeren, 2019; Soliz, 2023). Andragogical frame-

works emphasize adult learners' need for relevance, autonomy, and problem-centered learning—assumptions that remain central in contemporary adult education research and practice (Knowles et al., 2015; Tisdell & Taylor, 2020). CTE adds the imperative of industry alignment and, in many jurisdictions, licensure or credentialing requirements that specify competencies, coursework, and supervised practice (Advance CTE et al., 2025; Carnevale et al., 2022).

Three interrelated concepts frame this discussion: (1) andragogy and lifelong learning, (2) external standards and accreditation, and (3) faculty governance. Together, they provide a lens for understanding why efforts to integrate adult education and CTE are both necessary and vulnerable under hostile institutional leadership.

2.1. Andragogy and Lifelong Learning

Andragogy positions adults as self-directed, experience-rich learners who are most engaged when learning connects directly to their goals, roles, and prior knowledge (Knowles et al., 2015). Contemporary scholarship has expanded this view to emphasize power, identity, and context, noting that adult learning is always embedded in social and economic structures (Boeren, 2019; Tisdell & Taylor, 2020). In CTE, these insights translate into pedagogies that value workplace experience, support career transitions, and frame technical content within authentic problems and projects (CTE Research Network, 2024; Urban Institute, 2022).

From an andragogical perspective, integrating adult education and CTE is not simply a matter of combining course lists. It requires deliberately connecting adults' work and life histories to credential pathways—recognizing prior learning, validating informal skills, and helping learners make sense of how general education, basic skills, and technical coursework fit together in a coherent narrative of development. When leadership is hostile or inattentive, these integrative moves can be dismissed as optional “extras” rather than core design principles, even though they are central to adult learner persistence and success (Carnevale et al., 2022; Soliz, 2023).

2.2. External Standards and Accreditation

In adult education and CTE, program design is shaped not only by institutional preferences but also by external standards. State credentialing commissions, licensing bodies, industry advisory groups, and regional accreditors specify competencies, hours, and sometimes even course structures that must be met for programs to maintain approval (Advance CTE et al., 2025; CTE Research Network, 2024). Accreditation agencies have increasingly emphasized equity, transparency, and evidence of student learning, pushing institutions toward outcomes-based design and clearer public information (WSCUC, 2023).

These external standards can function as both constraints and a shield. On one hand, they limit purely local experimentation; faculty must ensure that integrative models still satisfy required competencies and hours. On the other hand, stand-

ards provide a defensible basis for faculty to resist idiosyncratic or harmful internal demands. When a dean or chair insists on a higher-unit, conflated model that is not required—and that may even conflict with credential regulations—faculty can point to external standards as the reference point, not personal preference.

In practice, misalignment can occur in several ways:

1) Maintaining legacy structures that exceed or contradict current standards, increasing cost and time-to-completion without added value for learners.

2) Conflating distinct standards (e.g., adult education vs. CTE foundations) into a single generic course sequence for administrative simplicity.

3) Using outdated catalog or web language as a defense for noncompliant structures, even when faculty have taught and advised under more current, standards-aligned models.

Under hostile leadership, these misalignments are not accidental. They become mechanisms for control: administrators can invoke “what the bulletin says” while ignoring how external standards have evolved or how faculty have adapted programs in practice.

2.3. Faculty Governance

The third lens is faculty governance. In most public higher education systems, faculty have primary responsibility for curriculum, subject matter, and methods of instruction; administrators are expected to support and implement faculty-determined curriculum rather than unilaterally defining or altering it (AAUP, n.d.; Linton, 2021). This principle is reflected in shared governance statements, senate bylaws, and accreditation expectations, which treat faculty expertise as central to academic decision-making (Learn & Work Ecosystem Library, 2024).

Faculty governance is not simply an internal procedural matter. For adult education and CTE, it is directly tied to professional ethics and public trust. Faculty are the ones most likely to understand how external standards intersect with local student populations, labor-market conditions, and program histories. When they design integrated adult/CTE pathways, they are exercising both disciplinary expertise and professional responsibility toward learners and the communities programs serve.

When leadership becomes hostile, this principle becomes a critical anchor and a source of both rights and responsibilities. Chairs or deans who unilaterally reinstate outdated models, block compliant proposals, or threaten program closure to force compliance are not just violating local norms; they are undermining the mechanisms that ensure programs remain aligned with disciplinary standards and public obligations (Xie & Freeman, 2024). Under such conditions, faculty governance shifts from an abstract ideal to a practical framework for ethical resistance: faculty must decide when to accept administrative decisions, when to challenge them internally, and when to escalate concerns to external bodies such as accreditors and licensure commissions.

Legitimate administrative constraints should be acknowledged. Institutions

may face real limits related to budgets, staffing lines, scheduling and room capacity, enrollment volatility, compliance timelines, and legal requirements for fiscal stewardship. Disagreement becomes hostile when such constraints are invoked selectively or opaquely—without shared data, without good-faith consultation, and in ways that consistently privilege administrative convenience over standards alignment, student welfare, and faculty’s primary responsibility for curriculum.

2.4. Distinguishing Ordinary Disagreement from Hostile Leadership

These three lenses—adult learning, external standards, and governance—help distinguish between ordinary disagreement and hostile leadership. In healthy systems, faculty and administrators may debate how best to integrate adult education and CTE, which models to prioritize, or how to sequence reforms. These disagreements occur within a shared commitment to compliance, student welfare, and faculty authority over curriculum.

1) Hostile leadership, by contrast, emerges when those with positional power use procedures, misrepresentation, or retaliation to block legitimate faculty efforts to align programs with standards and learner needs.

2) Repeatedly denying or delaying standards-aligned proposals without substantive feedback.

3) Insisting on noncompliant or unnecessarily burdensome models despite evidence of student harm.

Framing faculty who raise concerns as “problems” rather than partners, and using evaluation, workload, or program closure threats to silence them.

In such environments, the integration of adult education and CTE is not merely a technical challenge; it is a test of whether institutions will honor their obligations to adult learners, uphold external standards, and respect the role of faculty governance in safeguarding both.

2.5. Recognizing Hostile Leadership in Adult Education and CTE

Hostile leadership rarely announces itself directly. It typically surfaces through patterns of behavior that, over time, undermine sound program design, erode trust, and weaken faculty agency. In adult education and CTE, where faculty must balance external standards, complex student needs, and rapidly changing labor-market expectations, these patterns can have immediate consequences for learners (Boeren, 2019; Soliz, 2023).

One prominent pattern is procedural obstruction. Proposals that are aligned with standards and learner needs may be delayed, sent back repeatedly for minor edits, or held to shifting criteria, even as less compliant or outdated models move forward. Studies of destructive leadership in higher education describe this as “process-based resistance”, where leaders use committee structures, unclear timelines, or constantly changing expectations to stall or derail change without ever issuing an explicit “no” (Dunaway, 2014; Xie & Freeman, 2024). Over time, faculty

internalize the message that innovation—especially innovation that challenges legacy structures—is unwelcome.

A second pattern is narrative control and misrepresentation. Leaders may assert that “this is how we’ve always done it” or claim that a contested model has been in continuous use, even when faculty records and recent practice show otherwise. Research on academic bullying and gaslighting in universities notes that controlling the story about what has happened and what is “normal” is a common tactic for discrediting faculty accounts and limiting scrutiny (Hollis, 2021; Keashly & Neuman, 2018). In adult and CTE contexts, narrative control can be used to erase periods in which more compliant, student-centered models were actually implemented, thereby justifying a return to higher-unit or conflated structures.

A third pattern involves the conflation of distinct program standards. For example, treating adult education and CTE as interchangeable because they share a broad “career” label, and using one foundation course as the default for both, even when standards clearly distinguish between them. This type of conflation is not merely a technical error; it represents a disregard for the specific histories, learner populations, and regulatory frameworks that shape each field (Advance CTE et al., 2025; Tisdell & Taylor, 2020). Hostile leaders may frame such moves as “efficiency” or “simplification”, but the effect is to dilute professional preparation and mask noncompliance.

A fourth pattern is retaliatory framing. Faculty who raise concerns about non-compliance, student harm, or misalignment with external standards may be labeled “difficult”, “negative”, or “not team players”, while administrators’ choices are framed as neutral, necessary, or inevitable. Studies on academic retaliation highlight how performance evaluations, course assignments, and informal reputational campaigns can be used to punish dissent and deter others from speaking up (Hollis, 2021; Xie & Freeman, 2024). In adult education and CTE, this is particularly damaging because it targets the very faculty most attuned to labor-market needs and licensure expectations.

Finally, hostile leadership often involves weaponizing catalogs and web language. Outdated or inaccurate catalog text, web pages, or advising sheets are used as shields against current practice: leadership insists that faculty must revert to a higher-unit or conflated model because “the bulletin says so”, even when more recent, standards-aligned models have been approved or taught. In governance and accreditation literature, this is recognized as a form of “policy literalism” that selectively cites documents to defend predetermined decisions, rather than updating policies to reflect current standards and practice (Learn & Work Ecosystem Library, 2024; WSCUC, 2023). For students and external reviewers, the result is confusion: public-facing materials misrepresent the actual pathways faculty consider legitimate and compliant.

Recognizing these patterns is the first step. Faculty in adult education and CTE need a vocabulary for naming what is happening—not only to themselves but to their programs and learners. The second step is responding in ways that protect

students and programs without collapsing into despair or purely private resistance. As later sections of this article argue, this involves documenting patterns of obstruction, anchoring decisions in external standards, acting collectively through governance and unions, and, when necessary, escalating concerns to accreditors and licensure bodies. Hostile leadership cannot always be changed immediately, but its impact can be mitigated when faculty refuse to accept it as normal and instead treat it as a professional problem that demands an organized, principled response.

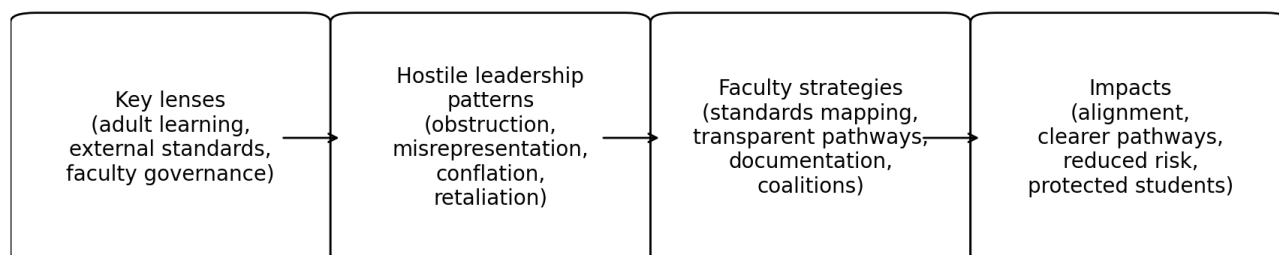


Figure 1. Faculty strategies for integrating adult education and CTE under hostile leadership.

Figure 1 summarizes the argument of this article. Adult learning, external standards, and faculty governance form the lenses through which integration should be designed. Hostile leadership patterns distort those lenses, but faculty can still act—individually and collectively—to center external standards, build transparent pathways, and protect students and programs from the worst effects of noncompliant or punitive decisions.

3. Hostile Leadership Figure—Three Connected Tables

Reading order (visual flow): **Top lenses** → **Hostile leadership patterns** → **Faculty strategies** → **Impacts**. (Tables 1-3)

Table 1. Key lenses shaping adult education & CTE context.

Adult learning & CTE integration	External standards & accreditation	Faculty governance
Adult learners with work/family obligations	Licensure/certification requirements	Curriculum and standards oversight
Integrated, stackable, accelerated pathways	State/national CTE frameworks	Shared governance bodies
Goal: reduce time/cost, increase clarity	Accreditors' focus on outcomes & alignment	Duty to protect learners & integrity

Table 2. Hostile leadership patterns (misalignment + obstruction).

Hostile leadership patterns (misalignment + obstruction)
Procedural obstruction (delays, shifting criteria, no substantive feedback)

Continued

Narrative control & misrepresentation (claiming outdated/noncompliant models are “standard”)
 Conflating distinct standards (adult ed vs. CTE vs. other requirements)
 Retaliatory framing (painting standards-focused faculty as “difficult”)
 Weaponizing catalog and past practice to block aligned models

Table 3. Faculty strategies and resulting impacts.

Faculty strategies for protecting students and programs	Impacts when faculty strategies prevail
Anchor in external standards (map courses/pathways to licensure/accreditation language)	Better alignment with licensure and accreditation
Design transparent, learner-centered pathways (stackable, realistic loads, clear sequences)	Clearer, more efficient pathways for adult learners
Use governance and documentation (formal committees, written records of decisions)	Stronger program integrity and public trust
Build coalitions and escalate carefully (faculty, unions, governance, accreditors when needed)	Reduced risk of noncompliance findings or sanctions

4. Integrating Adult Education and CTE under Constraint

Hostile leadership changes the conditions of integration, but it does not remove faculty’s obligation to design ethical, standards-aligned pathways. In adult education and CTE, that obligation is anchored not only in institutional missions but also in external frameworks: state credentialing requirements, accreditation standards, and national pushes for “credentials of value”, stackable pathways, and Integrated Education and Training (IET) under WIOA. The strategies below emphasize working with those external frameworks and building faculty solidarity to advance integration even when local leadership resists.

4.1. Center External Standards and Licensure Requirements

When internal politics are unstable, external standards become a lifeline. State teacher credentialing commissions define program design parameters (e.g., 9-unit CTE preparation sequences, alignment with state CTE standards, and explicit expectations for curriculum and assessment), and they enforce those standards through program review and approval. Similarly, state and national CTE frameworks now emphasize coherent pathways, equity, and labor-market alignment rather than arbitrary course accumulation. For instance, California’s Commission on Teacher Credentialing provides explicit program standards for designated-subject CTE and adult education preparation; analogous state/provincial licensure standards elsewhere serve the same function in guiding defensible program design.

Adult and CTE faculty can respond by:

- 1) Mapping each course and pathway directly to state and national standards.

For example, documenting how each credential course aligns with CTE teacher preparation standards, CTE model curriculum standards, and adult education/college-and career-readiness standards.

2) Showing explicitly how streamlined (e.g., 9-unit) models meet or exceed these expectations, while higher-unit or conflated models add cost and time without additional competencies—and in some cases contradict credentialing guidance.

3) Using standards language in syllabi, program plans, and advising documents, so that any misalignment is visible and legible to external reviewers—whether from credentialing bodies, accreditors, or state pathway initiatives.

This reframes internal disputes. Instead of “Whose preference wins?” the central questions become: *Which model aligns with licensure law and accreditation? Which model best serves the public interest in preparing qualified adult and CTE educators?*

4.2. Design Transparent, Learner-Centered Pathways

Adult learners in CTE and adult education make high-stakes decisions about work, family, and finances based on how they understand program structures. Recent work on adult learners and guided pathways emphasizes that unclear or shifting program maps disproportionately harm adults balancing employment, caregiving, and school.

Even under hostile leadership, faculty can mitigate harm by:

To make “student impact” legible to internal decision-makers and external reviewers, faculty can track concrete indicators such as:

1) Time-to-completion (in terms/years) under alternative pathway models; total required units/credits and estimated out-of-pocket cost (tuition/fees, books, travel);

2) Course availability and bottlenecks (frequency of required courses, waitlists, canceled sections);

3) Advising error rates (e.g., students placed into unnecessary courses) and resulting delay in milestones;

4) Retention/stop-out points by term and by sequence location (where adults are most likely to exit);

5) Credential/licensure completion rates and, where applicable, exam pass rates or field placement completion;

6) Employment outcomes where available (placement, wage progression, or employer verification for CTE pathways);

7) Equity gaps across student subgroups (adult learners, first-generation students, working caregivers).

a) Developing clearly documented, standards-aligned pathways (for example, separate 9-unit cores for adult education and for CTE) with visual maps, recommended sequences, and explicit links to credential and employment outcomes.

b) Using orientations, advising sessions, and official videos to explain credential

routes in plain language, including how coursework stacks toward credentials of value and how adults can re-enter or accelerate based on prior learning.

c) Documenting the impact of different models on time-to-completion and cost, using anonymized student cases or aggregate data to show how conflated or excess-unit structures delay credentials, wages, and advancement.

Even if catalogs or web pages lag behind, faculty-driven documentation creates a record of what students were advised, why faculty considered that guidance compliant, and how it aligned with external standards. That record can be critical if disputes later reach unions, accreditors, or credentialing commissions.

4.3. Maintain the Distinction between Adult Education and CTE

A recurring shortcut in hostile or careless environments is to collapse adult education and CTE into a generic “career” track, often by designating a single foundation course or conflating a set of requirements for both credentials. Yet adult education and CTE rest on distinct standards, histories, and communities of practice. Adult education credentials typically authorize academic and literacy instruction for adults (e.g., ESL, GED, basic skills), while Designated Subjects CTE credentials are focused on occupational and technical fields across secondary and adult settings.

Faculty can resist harmful conflation by:

1) Explicitly teaching and documenting the differences—for example, showing how adult education is grounded in literacy, basic skills, and community education, whereas CTE emphasizes occupational preparation, industry partnerships, and technical pedagogy.

2) Ensuring that foundational courses reflect those differences, with adult education foundations focused on adult learning, language, and equity, and CTE foundations focused on workplace competencies, safety, and industry-aligned curriculum.

3) Highlighting risks of conflation—including misaligned competencies, confusion in the field about what a credential signifies, and erosion of trust among employers and community partners. Recent work on CTE credentials of value stresses that credentials must be clearly connected to specific skill sets and labor-market outcomes, not bundled into vague, catch-all tracks.

Maintaining these distinctions is not turf protection. It is about integrity of preparation for adult educators and CTE teachers and honoring the different learner populations, policy frameworks, and workforce roles each credential is meant to serve.

4.4. Faculty Agency, Solidarity, and Ethical Resistance

Under hostile leadership, individual faculty members can feel isolated, vulnerable, and tempted to simply “keep their heads down”. In adult education and CTE—where programs often serve nontraditional, first-generation, and working learners—the cost of such silence is high. Integration work becomes safer and more

sustainable when it is grounded in collective faculty action and, where available, union support. Research on academic freedom and shared governance emphasizes that faculty agency is strongest when it is exercised collectively, not as a series of isolated individual stands (AAUP, n.d.; *Learn & Work Ecosystem Library*, 2024).

One foundational practice is to document everything. Faculty should keep dated records of proposals, approvals, advisement practices, and administrative responses. Patterns of obstruction, misrepresentation, or arbitrary decision-making are much easier to demonstrate with a clear paper trail than with general statements of concern. Documentation is central in both grievance processes and accreditation reviews, where committees rely heavily on written evidence to assess claims about governance, compliance, and student impact (Kezar & Maxey, 2016; WSCUC, 2023). In adult and CTE contexts, this may include side-by-side comparisons of proposed and mandated program models, records of how students were advised, and memos showing when standards-aligned designs were blocked or altered.

A second practice is to speak with a shared voice. When adult and CTE faculty agree that a particular model is noncompliant or harmful, joint statements, co-signed letters, and collective resolutions carry more weight than individual complaints. Studies of faculty organizing note that collective statements can reframe an issue from a “personality conflict” to a structural problem affecting programs and students (Berry, 2021; Rhoades, 2020). In environments where leadership has tried to portray concerns as the work of a single “difficult” faculty member, visible solidarity—especially across ranks (tenured, non-tenured, adjunct)—helps resist that narrative. For adult and CTE units, this may mean instructors, coordinators, and program leads jointly affirming which models they consider aligned with external standards and ethical practice.

Third, faculty can use governance channels strategically. Departmental votes, curriculum committees, school or college councils, and academic senate actions provide formal venues for contesting hostile or noncompliant decisions. While these processes can be slow and sometimes frustrating, they create an official record that is legible to accreditors, unions, and future leaders (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Linton, 2021). For example, a department or senate resolution affirming that a certain program structure is misaligned with state credentialing standards creates a publicly documented faculty position that is difficult to erase later. In adult and CTE programs, where structures may span multiple departments or colleges, cross-unit committees and senate bodies can be especially important in preventing one hostile leader from unilaterally reshaping pathways.

Fourth, faculty must know when to escalate externally. When internal remedies are exhausted—or when leadership’s actions create clear risk for students, licensure, or accreditation—faculty may have an ethical obligation to alert licensure bodies, accreditors, or, where appropriate, legal counsel. AAUP and other professional bodies emphasize that whistleblowing in defense of academic integrity, stu-

dent safety, or compliance with law is a legitimate, though often difficult, form of professional responsibility (AAUP, n.d.; Hollis, 2021). In adult and CTE contexts, this can include reporting noncompliant credential structures to state commissions, informing regional accreditors about governance breakdowns affecting program quality, or working with unions to file formal complaints. Doing so is not disloyalty; it is part of protecting the public's trust in educator preparation.

Specific collective bargaining topics that can operationalize "program integrity" include:

- 1) Faculty's primary responsibility is for the language of curriculum, program requirements, and assessment standards, with clear limits on unilateral administrative changes;
- 2) Written notice and consultation timelines for any proposed program restructuring, unit/credit changes, or catalog/advising language changes;
- 3) A joint labor-management curriculum integrity committee (or equivalent) with documented minutes and escalation pathways;
- 4) Anti-retaliation protections for raising accreditation/licensure compliance concerns, including protections related to evaluation, workload, and assignment;
- 5) Workload and release-time provisions for accreditation/assessment labor (evidence collection, reporting, site-visit preparation);
- 6) Requirements that public-facing materials (catalog, website, advising sheets) match approved program pathways and be corrected within defined timeframes;
- 7) Records access and data transparency provisions so faculty can obtain the metrics needed to document student impact and program quality.

Finally, ethical resistance requires reframing the goal. The purpose is not to win personal battles with particular leaders or to "get even". It is to protect learners and the integrity of the profession, even when those with positional power resist. Faculty in adult education and CTE occupy a unique position: they see, first-hand, the effects of program structures on credential candidates' time, cost, and opportunities. When they act collectively—documenting harm, asserting standards, using governance channels, and escalating when necessary—they are not only defending themselves; they are upholding the core purposes of adult and technical education in a democratic society (Boeren, 2019; Tisdell & Taylor, 2020).

In this sense, faculty agency, solidarity, and ethical resistance are themselves forms of curricular and moral leadership. They model for students—and for the broader community—what it means to take responsibility for one's field, to insist on alignment between institutional rhetoric and practice, and to refuse to normalize harm in the name of convenience or hierarchy.

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The patterns described in this article—hostile leadership, conflated standards, and resistance to faculty-led integration of adult education and CTE—are not merely local personnel problems. They carry implications for institutional policy, collective bargaining, and the broader ecosystem of accreditation and credentialing. Be-

low, I highlight implications for four key groups: faculty, unions and faculty associations, administrators, and accreditors/credentialing bodies.

5.1. For Faculty

Integrating adult education and CTE under hostile leadership requires both design skill and political literacy. Faculty need deep expertise in curriculum, pedagogy, and adult learning—but they also need to understand policy, accreditation, and governance rules well enough to frame their work in those terms (Boeren, 2019; Tisdell & Taylor, 2020). This includes:

- 1) Reading and using state credential standards, CTE frameworks, and accreditation handbooks as core texts for program design, not as afterthoughts (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2023; WSCUC, 2023).
- 2) Learning how faculty governance is supposed to work—through senate by-laws, AAUP guidance, and system policies—so that departures from those norms are visible and contestable (AAUP, n.d.; Kezar & Eckel, 2004).
- 3) Building basic organizing skills: how to write collective statements, document decisions, and work with allies in other units.

Faculty in adult education and CTE carry much of the responsibility for ensuring that integration efforts remain grounded in adult learner needs and external standards. That responsibility now includes understanding the political and regulatory terrain in which their programs operate.

5.2. For Unions and Faculty Associations

Cases of hostile leadership in adult/CTE contexts should be treated as more than interpersonal conflict; they are program and accreditation risks. Unions and faculty associations can:

- 1) Incorporate program integrity and compliance language into collective bargaining agreements, including protections around program closure, workload, and retaliation for raising accreditation or licensure concerns (Rhoades, 2020).
- 2) Use grievance and unfair labor practice mechanisms when leadership's actions create documented risks to students, licensure, or accreditation, not only when they harm individual faculty (Berry, 2021; Hollis, 2021).
- 3) Provide training and support for faculty in adult and CTE units on how to document harm, frame complaints in terms of standards and student impact, and coordinate action across ranks.

When unions treat adult and CTE struggles as central to their mission rather than peripheral, they help ensure that some of the most vulnerable learners—and the faculty who serve them—are not left to navigate hostile conditions alone.

5.3. For Administrators

Deans and chairs who approach adult education and CTE as expendable or interchangeable miss an opportunity to advance institutional missions in equity, workforce development, and student success. Current policy discourse emphasizes the

importance of high-quality CTE and adult pathways for economic mobility, especially for working adults and learners from historically marginalized communities (Advance CTE et al., 2025; Urban Institute, 2022). Administrators who treat these programs as disposable undermine their own institution's stated goals.

Constructive partnership with faculty, not top-down control, is the sustainable path. Administrators can:

- 1) Treat adult and CTE faculty as content and standards experts, involving them early and consistently in decisions about program structure, catalog language, and external reporting.

- 2) Use external standards as a shared reference point rather than as occasional compliance checks, integrating them into strategic planning and resource allocation (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2023; WSCUC, 2023).

- 3) Recognize that threats of program closure or consolidation, when used as bargaining tools, not only damage trust but also create potential liabilities with accreditors and credentialing bodies.

Emerging research on academic middle management suggests that chairs and deans are most effective when they balance institutional constraints with advocacy for their programs and faculty (Gmelch et al., 2023; Xie & Freeman, 2024). Nowhere is this balance more critical than in adult education and CTE.

5.4. For Accreditors and Credentialing Bodies

Finally, accreditors and credentialing bodies play a pivotal role. When faculty bring forward well-documented concerns about noncompliant structures or student harm, external bodies should respond promptly and clearly. Their actions—or silence—shape the behavior of institutional leaders.

Implications include:

- 1) Ensuring that complaint and whistleblower processes are accessible, transparent, and protective of faculty who report noncompliance in good faith (AAUP, n.d.; Hollis, 2021).

- 2) Making explicit, in standards and review reports, how governance failures and hostile leadership in program areas like adult and CTE will be evaluated and remedied (WSCUC, 2023).

- 3) Providing guidance to institutions on how to realign conflicting internal policies (e.g., outdated catalogs) with current standards and approved program designs.

When external bodies respond decisively to credible faculty concerns, they reinforce the message that standards and student protection are non-negotiable—and that hostile leadership practices carry real consequences beyond campus politics.

6. Conclusion

Integrating adult education and CTE is challenging even under supportive leadership; under hostile leadership, it can feel nearly impossible. Yet the very features

that make these programs vulnerable—their proximity to working adults, rapidly changing labor markets, and complex regulatory environments—also position faculty as crucial stewards of educational integrity. Adult and CTE educators sit at the intersection of learner experience and the external standards that define responsible practice (Boeren, 2019; Soliz, 2023).

This article has argued that meaningful integration requires more than creative curriculum design. It demands andragogical grounding, so that pathways honor adults' prior learning and lived realities (Tisdell & Taylor, 2020); alignment with external standards and licensure requirements, so that models are defensible not only locally but in the eyes of the public and the state (Advance CTE et al., 2025; California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2023); and clear distinctions where standards require them, particularly between adult education and CTE foundations. It also requires collective faculty agency—using governance structures, unions, and, when necessary, complaint mechanisms to resist noncompliant or harmful models (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Xie & Freeman, 2024).

Hostile leadership may control titles, short-term decisions, and the tone of internal meetings, but it does not ultimately define the profession. Over time, the integrity of adult and CTE pathways depends on those willing to integrate them thoughtfully, document their impact, and say “no” when institutional fallacies place learners and the public at risk. When faculty act from that stance—anchored in adult learning theory, external standards, and shared governance—they keep faith with the core purposes of adult and technical education and ensure that, even in difficult institutional climates, programs remain worthy of the communities they are meant to serve (Urban Institute, 2022; WASC Senior College and University Commission, 2023).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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