Action Guide for Adult-Ready Transformation
Accessibility

›› Need for Accessibility

Accessibility across a diverse range of post-traditional learners requires meeting these learners where they are and providing clear information about what postsecondary programs do (and don't) offer. Accessibility goes beyond initial marketing information and on-ramps. It requires making it possible for more populations of adult learners to gain entry to postsecondary programs, whether through policies that open the front doors wider or through funding that is specifically geared towards those at or over the age of 25.

Because these learners differ in priorities from their traditional-age counterparts, institutions, systems, and states must be intentional in every way to make postsecondary programs accessible and affordable. This requires positioning each component of the marketing, onboarding, admission, and funding process to address the needs, goals, and aspirations of these learners. Without targeted outreach campaigns and changes to funding opportunities for post-traditional learners, public institutions will struggle to recruit and successfully serve these students.

›› Value of Accessibility

Implementing these changes will make it possible for many more post-traditional learners to recognize the relevance of postsecondary education and training to their career goals. They will be able to see themselves in these programs. They will find that it is possible and affordable. These early steps are the most critical means of engaging, educating, training, and upskilling adult learners so they will be prepared for the high-demand and high-wage jobs that will be needed in order for our local, regional and national economies to thrive.

›› Equity in Accessibility

Achieving equity in accessibility starts with examining the factors that limit students' ability to enroll in college. But, equity considerations go beyond enrollment to include equitable access to high-demand programs and to the evidence-based practices and supports that are known to impact student success. Many factors can inadvertently block or deter post-traditional students from pursuing a credential. Institutions and states should interrogate the design of their financial aid programs, the eligibility requirements of in-demand and high-impact programs and services, and communication strategies to ensure that adult students, particularly students of color, are not unintentionally deterred from pursuing a credential.

Strategies & Actions

To make postsecondary programs more accessible for post-traditional learners, institutions, systems, and states should implement the following strategies, in accordance with the iterative approach laid out in the user's guide and the findings of the self-assessment. The strategies and actions to implement, to improve, and to go to the next level are as follows:

STRATEGY #1:

Ensure institutional and state aid works for post-traditional learners

TO IMPLEMENT	TO IMPROVE	TO GO NEXT LEVEL
• Reduce barriers within current financial aid programs or design new ones for post-traditional learners	• Incorporate strategic emergency grants as a key component of aid offerings	• Braid state and federal funding

STRATEGY #2:

Use financial levers to increase postsecondary engagement and progression for key post-traditional populations

TO IMPLEMENT	TO GO NEXT LEVEL
• Expand use of Ability to Benefit	• Offer small dollar retention and completion grants • Forgive unpaid balances to promote re-enrollment and transfer

STRATEGY #3:

Conduct comprehensive outreach to all post-traditional learners

TO IMPLEMENT	TO IMPROVE
• Launch a comprehensive campaign aimed at (re)enrolling post-traditional learners	• Orient marketing materials around post-traditional learners • Be transparent about the time, cost and value of programs

Strategy #1

Ensure institutional and state aid works for post-traditional learners

⚙️ **TO IMPLEMENT**

Reduce barriers within current aid programs or design new ones for post-traditional learners

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	All

Financial resources are essential for helping post-traditional learners access and succeed in higher education, but today's system of financial assistance was not built for adults. Data from the Graduate! Network, a primary technical assistance provider for adult students, shows that finances are the largest reason adult students dropout of college.[1] Institutions and states, therefore, must meet the financial needs of students at or over the age of 25 for them to achieve a postsecondary credential. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) recommends the following structure to make aid available to post-traditional learners: 1) base awards on need; 2) allow students to enroll part-time; 3) decouple programs from high school graduation date; 4) publish an application deadline statewide after August 1st; and 5) include two-year and technical colleges.[2]

An Education Commission of the States (ECS) evaluation of state aid programs looked at the two largest financial aid programs in each state and compared the requirements of those programs to the CLASP recommendations. The study found that the majority of the largest state aid programs fail to meet the CLASP criteria. Almost half the programs (48) were merit-based, one-fourth (26) relied on high school graduation date for eligibility, one-third (30) required full-time enrollment, and one-fifth (19) excluded students attending two-year institutions. Most state programs (65) included two or fewer of the characteristics that would help make higher education accessible to adult students, indicating that many state financial aid programs will shut post-traditional students out of funding for their postsecondary programs. Only one program, Minnesota's Postsecondary Child Care Grant Program, included all of the CLASP recommended components.[3]

[1] 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

[2] Taliaferro, W., & Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2016). Redesigning State Financial Aid to Better Serve Nontraditional Adult Students. Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success.

[3] Pingel, S. & Holly, N. (2017). Seeking Support: State financial aid programs and adult students. Education Commission of the States. https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Seeking_Support_-_State_financial_aid_programs_and_adult_students-1.pdf

CASE STUDY

Building Buy in for State Financial Aid for Post-traditional Learners: Futures for Frontliners & Michigan Reconnect

BACKGROUND

One of Governor Whitmer's main campaign priorities was to address the skills gap in Michigan. Existing initiatives to address skills development were limited, and the state historically has not invested in financial aid for those at or over the age of 25. In 2019, as part of the "60 by 30" goal of reaching 60% postsecondary degree or credential attainment in the state with a 50% reduction in the racial equity gap by 2030, a team at the Governor's Office worked alongside Chambers of Commerce and other stakeholders to advocate for state funding for workforce development and skills training. The team realized that adult workforce development was one of the few areas in the state that had bipartisan support. The proposed talent development strategy was MI Reconnect, a last-dollar tuition-free community college program for Michiganders at or over the age of 25. The MI Reconnect bill passed in March of 2020, right at the time when the COVID-19 pandemic was unfolding, and the country was going into a lockdown. Given the uncertainty about the fiscal year ahead, the Governor vetoed the appropriation, to free the funding for potential costs associated with the pandemic.

When the state received funding through the CARES Act shortly after, they decided to allocate part of the funds for 'Futures for Frontliners.' Using the same design as MI Reconnect, Future for Frontliners served as a soft launch for MI Reconnect. The only difference between the programs is related to eligibility. Whereas MI Reconnect is open to all those at or over the age of 25, Futures for Frontliners targeted people working in essential industries during the first wave of the pandemic, regardless of age. MI Reconnect was launched later in the year, once the state's fiscal prospects became clearer.

GETTING STARTED

Program designers modeled MI Reconnect after TN Reconnect. As a way to garner support for the program, the team at the Governor's office worked with the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to organize a trip to Tennessee for Michigan legislators to meet with the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Tennessee state legislators to learn about the success of TN Reconnect.

The team designing MI Reconnect worked with their higher education partners in Tennessee to learn about their yield, estimate the number of students the program would serve, and budget costs accordingly. The MI Reconnect bill was sponsored by Republican legislators and was supported by key Republicans in the state as well as powerful business coalitions and associations, whose members were facing talent shortages, particularly in the middle-skills jobs. Compared to a universal free-tuition community college program, a program targeted at a certain age group was perceived more positively and in line with a workforce development strategy, instead of as an entitlement program.

Finally, the state partnered with a communications firm to develop marketing and messaging materials and launched the application.

GETTING TO SCALE

The launch of Futures for Frontliners helped to fine tune implementation before the initiative was scaled to all adults in the state. The program at scale will serve multiple cohorts and students have up to four years to complete their degrees. At scale, the program is estimated to cost 60 million dollars.

Based on how community colleges are funded, access to the program will not be equal across districts. Students living in communities that do not belong to a community college district have to pay out-of-district tuition if they decide to attend community college. For those students, MI Reconnect will pay the in-district portion of the tuition, and the students will be responsible for the balance. Currently 20% of the population eligible for MI Reconnect do not live in a community college district, which constitutes a barrier for scale.

The state is considering allocating federal stimulus funding to provide a stipend to those Futures for Frontliners and MI Reconnect students fully funded by Pell to support basic needs. In the meantime, they are trying to leverage existing public assistance programs via MI Reconnect Navigators who connect students with supports related to basic needs via MI Bridges.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

1. Target the initiative to a population that is at-risk or in urgent need of training due to economic shifts, and use that strategy to pilot the program or as a soft launch for a more universal program for adults;

2. Review and coordinate processes for recruitment, admissions and registration, so that post-traditional students understand the financial assistance that is available to them throughout their programs;

3. While last-dollar tuition programs divert state funds away from students in the lower income brackets, last-dollar plus, or first-dollar programs are less feasible both politically and fiscally. A robust basic needs agenda is one way to provide additional supports for students facing basic needs insecurity. See the Massachusetts case study in the Partnerships Action Guide; and

4. Consider the interplay of federal stimulus funding and state funding to promote innovation.

TO IMPROVE

Incorporate strategic emergency grants as a key component of aid offerings

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	All

Unexpected emergency expenses are one of the biggest challenges to successful degree completion for post-traditional learners. Because many post-traditional learners experience high levels of unmet need, they may not have the capacity to absorb common obstacles and challenges that occur in everyday life. Providing students with resources to cope with financial emergencies helps improve retention.[4]

Emergency aid programs exist on many campuses to help students pay for unexpected expenses that arise during the academic year. Of 523 campuses reporting an emergency aid program in a 2016 study, 82% had the program in place for three or more years. Most of these programs are funded through foundations or institutional aid. Many of these institutions' resources are distributed via word of mouth, although some campuses use email or a website to alert students to the availability of the program.[5]

At the state level, while there has not been as much engagement on emergency aid as at the institutional level, a handful of states, such as California, Minnesota, North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin, have established programs. Many of these states have established emergency aid funding pools for which institutions can apply through a competitive process.

[4] Beach, C., Pih, M., & Yan, L. (2008). *Helping Community College Students Cope with Financial Emergencies.* MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_383.pdf
[5] Kruger, K., Parnell, A., & Wesaw, A. (2016) *Landscape analysis of emergency aid programs.* Washington, DC: NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

Exemplars

Compton College partnered with Edquity, a mobile app service managing emergency aid funding for colleges and universities, to help identify and allocate emergency resources to 289 students during the 2020 Spring semester. Of the applicants, 92% received aid, with most students receiving funds within two days of completing their application. While more research is needed, preliminary evidence suggests that grant recipients were twice as likely to graduate or earn a credential than those with similar needs who did not receive aid.[6]

Texas created an emergency aid network, which worked with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to survey institutions and better understand the landscape of emergency aid in Texas. Through this network survey, institutions disseminated a series of best practices to improve emergency aid programs across the state. When Texas received federal CARES Act funds in 2020, it used this state network to distribute the emergency aid funds.[7]

Minnesota's state-level emergency aid program, the Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students ([EAPS]) was created in 2017 and appropriated $175,000 per year for distribution to institutions for emergency aid. Institutions apply for the funds through a competitive grant process and must match the award dollar for dollar.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

1. Scale existing emergency aid programs by more strategically targeting students in need. Deploying tools such as Edquity or other predictive analytics softwares in combination with clearly communicated programs has been shown to increase persistence and completion; and

2. At the state level, consider surveying the landscape of institutional emergency aid programs in order to identify needs and amplify best practices.

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[6] Anderson, D. (2021). *Edquity grantees cross the finish line at Compton College.* https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/5e56bab4a602182939defee3/60231471074d5730b3c8bf98_Edquity%20Compton%20College%20Impact%20Evaluation%202.8.21%20(1).pdf

[7] Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2018). *The Texas Emergency Aid Report: Advocating for Emergency Aid Programs in Higher Education.* Austin, TX. http://www.60x30tx.com/media/1453/emergency-aid-report.pdf

TO GO NEXT LEVEL

Braid state and federal funding

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	All

Finding ways to braid resources is an important means of helping learners more easily access available funds. Federal funds focused on education and training originate from the departments of education, labor, health and human services, housing and urban development, and agriculture. Creating coherence within a state across multiple federal funding sources can create impactful supports for learners. The recent reauthorization of the *Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins)* and the *Workforce Investment Act* now *Workforce Innovation* and *Opportunity Act (WIOA)* explicitly calls for integration in career and technical education, adult education, workforce, and public benefits, among other programs. Increasingly, these programs are being integrated due to enhanced government efficiency and research demonstrating the merits of braided and blended resources on student outcomes.[8]

States are responsible for creating statewide and regional plans for many federally funded programs. States can prepare a "combined" state plan, addressing WIOA programs and a number of other "state partner programs" such as TANF, SNAP, Perkins, Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG), and Reintegration of Ex-Offenders (ReXO). In particular, statewide planning processes for these funds provide a unique opportunity to align definitions and outcomes to ensure stakeholders know how funding sources can work together to better serve students, particularly adult learners. For example, WIOA funding can be used for career planning and career pathway selection.

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[8] AGA. (2014, December). Blended and Braided Funding: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners. https://www.agacgfm.org/AGA/Intergovernmental/documents/BlendedandBraidedFunding.pdf

Exemplars

Utah, in 1997, reorganized employment, training, and welfare programs into a single state agency, the Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS). This realignment has streamlined funding, reduced the complexity of the system, and realized increased efficiencies. There are no Local Workforce Development Areas in Utah nor are federal funds allocated to a myriad of Local Workforce Development Boards. Instead, WIOA, Vocational Rehabilitation, and TANF dollars flow directly to DWS, and DWS allocates funds to one-stop centers across the state. Utah's single agency system ensures standardized branding, quality, and experience across workforce development in the state.[9]

Mott Community College (MCC) in Michigan has successfully braided funding for students entering through their Workforce and Economic Development Center for years. Student eligibility for funding from different program streams is determined by a counselor at intake. The application provides all information necessary for tracking students and students are simply informed that they're eligible for funding. One example of this is a certified nurse assistant (CNA) apprenticeship program in partnership with Vicinia Gardens, a senior care facility. Students work for Vicinia as resident assistants, while completing their classroom studies and clinical hours. The program is part of Expanding Community College Apprenticeships (ECCA), an American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) initiative supported by the U.S. Department of Labor. The local Michigan Works provided Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) funds to reimburse 75% of training costs. Additional support through an AACC ECCA grant was used to support students to buy needed equipment and provide other support services.

TIP FOR LEADERS

1 States should leverage planning processes to establish a common definition of post-traditional learners and goals for better serving them across postsecondary education, adult education and workforce training. See additional information around setting common metrics in the Data Action Guide. State leaders can begin by asking these questions:

A) What are the priority groups in the state's population we want to support in adult education and training? (For instance, low income, single parents, justice-involved, etc.)

B) What are the costs and potential impacts of the initiative and what sources of funds are available and allowable across the agencies?

C) What is the working model to administer the initiative, secure funding, provide reporting and evaluation and delivery of services in the most efficient manner? What is the cost allocation model for sharing costs across the relevant agencies and programs to enable integrated and efficient services?

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[9] Bishop, M. (2020). Landscape study of federal employment and training programs. https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Landscape-Study-of-Federal-Employment-and-Training-Programs-2.pdf?x91208

Strategy #2

Use financial levers to increase postsecondary engagement and progression for key post-traditional populations

TO IMPLEMENT

Expand use of Ability to Benefit

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	Adults seeking a high school credential; English language learners

Post-traditional learners without a high school diploma have long been unable to access postsecondary programs and have instead been routed through adult basic education programs with unclear pathways to postsecondary education and training. There are renewed means, however, of connecting those seeking a high school credential and English language learners to postsecondary programs. Ability to Benefit is a federal program that allows learners who do not have a high school diploma to be eligible for federal financial aid for postsecondary programs. Often, this program is leveraged through integrated education and training. See *maximize integrated education and training* in the Program Change Action Guide for more information.

Ability to Benefit is an important on-ramp for these learners. It is an acceleration strategy, as it allows learners to pursue a GED and college courses at the same time. The program requires learners to be on a career pathway and complete six college credits or pass a U.S. Department of Education assessment exam in order to be eligible to begin receiving Pell grants. Therefore, while Ability to Benefit provides a new opportunity, it also creates a barrier for learners who are not able to afford the tuition costs for these initial courses and may have been out of the education system for such a length of time that their chance to pass the exam are reduced.

To account for challenges presented by assessment exams, the U.S. Department of Education allows states to create their own eligibility process for Ability to Benefit and seek approval from the Department. Until recently, no state had developed and submitted a plan. However, Iowa, Mississippi, Washington, and Wisconsin received approval in 2020. According to CLASP, "creating a state process could provide an additional workforce training funding stream for students and states to leverage. It could also provide states an opportunity to align student and institutional requirements with other WIOA activities, workforce needs, and/or state initiatives."[10]

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[10] Walizer, L., State Strategies for Addressing College Students' Basic Needs; CLASP January 15, 2020. https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/state-strategies-addressing-college-students-basic-needs

CASE STUDY

A Statewide Pathway to Ability to Benefit: the Louisiana Community and Technical College System *5 for 6 Scholarship*

BACKGROUND

In 2013, Louisiana was ranked 50th nationally in terms of college degree attainment. Furthermore, 23% of the state's working age population did not have a high school diploma, and those individuals had limited options to access postsecondary education or federal financial aid. To tackle this issue, the state developed a strategic plan and set the Our Louisiana 2020 goals to increase postsecondary enrollment, attainment and other metrics. In order to meet these goals, the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) identified the need for a more intentional and comprehensive focus on adult learners with no high school diploma.

While the agenda focused on post-traditional learners encompassed a series of interventions, including increased education and workforce alignment and a statewide outreach marketing campaign, this case study focuses on LCTCS's approach to leveraging the Ability to Benefit (ATB) provisions of the Pell Grant. ATB allows postsecondary students without a high school diploma or equivalency to receive Title IV student financial aid if they pass an approved ATB test or complete at least six credit hours of college-level coursework.

GETTING STARTED

In 2010, LCTCS launched WorkReady U, a comprehensive adult education program, on every community college campus. The program offers free classes to help students earn a high school equivalency diploma and get ready for college and career options. In addition to increasing the proportion of the working population with a high school diploma, the program intended to ensure seamless access to postsecondary education.

When LCTCS institutions increased tuition for the 2015-2016 academic year, leadership at the system office saw an opportunity to create a bridge for WorkReady U students to further their education and training. The plan was to use part of the increased revenue from the tuition bump to provide scholarships and remove the financial barrier presented by the six college-level credits required to demonstrate eligibility for ATB. So, LCTCS created the 5 for 6 Scholarship, which was funded by requiring all community and technical colleges in the system to allocate 5% of the revenue generated from tuition increases to the scholarship program. To make the case, LCTCS argued that colleges would recoup their costs; by allowing students to access federal financial aid, they would be more likely to persist and complete their programs at the institution.

Once the financial barrier to pay for the six credits was removed, LCTCS shifted its focus to review policies and procedures that presented additional barriers for post-traditional students. For example, system-level policy required LCTCS institutions to ask for proof of high school completion for admission. LCTCS leadership made a request to the LCTCS Board of Supervisors to remove the high school credential requirement. The team faced resistance from some institutions that perceived the measure as a threat to standards and quality. The leadership at LCTCS worked with stakeholders to challenge the belief that students without a high school diploma are not ready for college-level work, and the requirement was removed. Outcomes data provide evidence to support this argument showing that 60% of *5 for 6 scholarship* recipients maintained a GPA of 2.0 or higher.

Finally, LCTCS gave the colleges and the WorkReady U instructors autonomy to determine eligibility requirements to access the 5 for 6 Scholarship, which varied from test scores to an application process. Colleges were also given autonomy to determine which college-level courses 5 for 6 scholarship recipients could register for. According to leadership, giving institutions autonomy during implementation helped with buy-in and allowed exploration of a variety of processes, which led to the identification of best practices.

GETTING TO SCALE

As the team at LCTCS moved forward with the 5 for 6 Scholarship, barriers were identified that they are now working to remove. For example, the requirement to submit a high school transcript to the institution was a barrier. LCTCS changed the policy to waive the requirement at the beginning of the program, but made it mandatory once a student starts a degree in a selective admissions program where it is required by a licensing board, such as the Board of Nursing. LCTCS also improved mechanisms to award credit for prior learning and experience. The focus on adult learners has been a process of continuous improvement at the system-level that could positively impact scale as additional barriers are removed (e.g. basic needs insecurity).

While the 5 for 6 scholarship allows WorkReady U students to later access federal financial aid toward a degree, the system recognizes more collaborative work is needed from adult education and academic program staff to align pathways for students and make students aware of those pathways. One avenue to streamline this process is adopting another college's pathway. That is, colleges can design their own integrated pathway and request the approval from LCTCS Board of Supervisors   which requires significant paperwork and waiting time   or adopt the pathway designed by another college without requiring the board's approval. Program adoption has increased in the last year for programs providing education and training for in-demand occupations.

Finally, the ability to use tuition revenue to provide the 5 for 6 Scholarship has been an important driver of scale, but it has its limitations. Initially, the system obtained $600,000 for the 5 for6 Scholarship, which meant only 600 students could be funded annually. This was a small proportion of the approximately 13,000 students that, according to the system's estimates, needed the scholarship. Moreover, as with many state funding formulas, if enrollment decreases and colleges make less revenue from tuition, then the number of students benefiting from the scholarship also decreases.

Looking forward, LCTCS hopes to bring four-year institutions into the adult education agenda. While all LCTCS institutions provide funds for and offer the 5 for 6 scholarship, four-year institutions are not yet participating.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

1 Ensure adult basic education is connected to postsecondary education and training in some capacity to promote pathways to further learning;

2 Start with aligning adult education programs with career and technical education programs, then move to more transfer-oriented programs of study. See Pima Community College's approach to ABE and CTE pathways in the Program Change Action Guide; and

3 A funding model that relies on unstable tuition revenue will benefit from additional funding sources such as public and philanthropic funding.

TO GO NEXT LEVEL

Offer small-dollar retention and completion grants

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions	All

Too many students drop out before they complete a credential or degree. To avoid this, many institutions have developed completion grants. In general, these tend to be small-dollar grants designed to help students who face financial hurdles toward the end of their degree program. A pilot program conducted by the Association for Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) and the Coalition of Urban-Serving Universities (USU) at nine institutions resulted in 93% of the over 1,200 grantees being retained or graduated within a year of the using the program, suggesting these completion grants can be a powerful tool for completion.[11]

According to APLU and USU, retention or completion grant programs are a "high-touch" enterprise. Institutions looking to replicate this practice should, "be prepared to commit time, staff, and resources to ensure the program's effectiveness."[12] In their evaluation, the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice cautioned that the financial gaps completion grant recipients had were, in some cases, created by federal financial aid requirements (e.g. Satisfactory Academic Progress), state financial aid requirements, and institutional practice (e.g. front-loaded scholarships), suggesting that the first course of action should be to ensure state and institutional aid programs meet the needs of post-traditional learners prior to launching completion grant programs.[13]

Exemplar

In 2013, **Strayer University**, a for-profit college specializing in serving adults, launched the "Graduation Fund" that allows students to get their last ten credits for free if they complete the first 30 classes toward their bachelor's degree. Between 2013 and 2017, more than 8,600 bachelor's degree students took advantage of this fund. The fund resulted in a 43% increase in continued enrollment, a 90% increase in persistence rates, and a 46% increase in success (either through graduation or continuous enrollment). This fund was also paired with a cohort approach that encourages relationships, a success coach, and a student success course.

TIP FOR LEADERS

1 Embed completion grants as a component of other comprehensive efforts to reform financial aid policy for and provide more tailored coaching to post-traditional learners.

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11 The Hope Center. (2018). *Completion Grants: A College Affordability Innovation Worthy of Public Investment?* https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Completion-Grant-Policy-Brief-layout-v3-12-12-19.pdf

12 The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. (2016). *Foiling the Drop-out Trap: Completion Grant Practices for Retaining and Graduating Students.* https://www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/urban-initiatives/coalition-of-urban-serving-universities/aplu-usu-dropout-trap-full.pdf

11 The Hope Center. (2018). *Completion Grants: A College Affordability Innovation Worthy of Public Investment?* https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Completion-Grant-Policy-Brief-layout-v3-12-12-19.pdf

TO GO NEXT LEVEL

Forgive unpaid balances to promote re-enrollment and transfer

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	Some college, no degree

Post-traditional learners can be prevented from re-enrolling in programs or accessing transcripts from past institutions due to unpaid tuition and fee balances. Such balances, which are often relatively small, can mean the difference between being able to continue education and having all prior credits count or not. Learners who bear the burden of past debt and lost credits may be hesitant to consider returning and continuing their program. A recent national estimate by Ithaka S + R suggests that there could be as much as $15 billion in unpaid balances to colleges and universities, affecting approximately 6.6 million students. Since an outstanding balance often means that a student cannot even get a transcript, this leaves these 6.6 million students with "stranded" credits credits that they may not be able to access.[14]

Exemplars

The Warrior Way Back program at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan provides up to $1,500 to students who would like to return to complete their degree. In its first year, the program welcomed back 56 students, and nine graduated in a single semester.[15] This resulted in a net gain of $200,000 in revenue for the institution from increased enrollment.[16] Because of this program's success, it was expanded regionally through a partnership with the Detroit Regional Chamber that included reciprocity agreements and transcript sharing across institutions to create a regional approach to debt forgiveness and college access.[17]

In 2019, **California** passed the Educational Debt Collection Practices Act barring public and private institutions of higher education from withholding official transcripts as a debt collection tactic. The bill recognizes that the withholding of transcripts causes a severe hardship for students and is counterproductive to debt collection, as it creates obstacles to postsecondary degree attainment and career advancement.[18] California was the first state to enact such legislation. Similar laws have passed in Washington and Louisiana.

TIP FOR LEADERS

1. As a starting point, consider measuring the return on investment of a debt-forgiveness program in terms of enrollment and retention to build the case for these programs at both the state and institutional level.

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[14] Karon, J., Ward, J. D., Hill, C. B., & Kurzweil, M. (2020, October 5). Solving Stranded Credits: Assessing the Scope and Effects of Transcript Withholding on Students, States, and Institutions. https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313978

[15] Salanger, C., Davis, L., & Ajinkya, J. (2019). Innovative Strategies to Close Postsecondary Attainment Gaps Institutional Debt-Forgiveness Programs. Institute for Higher Education Policy. https://www.aplu.org/library/foiling-the-drop-out-trap-completion-grant-practices-for-retaining-and-graduating-students/file

[16] Ibid.

[17] Kreighbaum, A. (2019, April). A Second Chance at Detroit Colleges. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/10/07/detroit-colleges-tackle-dropout-challenge-offering-debt-forgiveness

[18] *Educational Debt Collection Practices Act,* Cal. Assemb. B. 1313 (2019-2020), Chapter 518 (Cal. Stat. 2019)

Strategy #3

Conduct comprehensive outreach to post-traditional learners

TO IMPLEMENT

Launch a comprehensive campaign aimed at the (re)enrolling post-traditional learners

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	All

Outreach for post-traditional learners requires going to where they are with messages that resonate with their situations. This is done through marketing efforts, written material, websites, as well as through relationships with employers and community-based organizations to help get the message out. While targeted outreach may feel more effective, efforts to date have found that taking a comprehensive approach aimed at broader populations of adult learners, across different stages of education and experience, is most effective in reaching prospective learners and converting interest into enrollment.

Outreach campaigns can be conducted at the institutional, regional or community, system, and state level. At whatever level the campaign is being conducted, it requires institutions and other stakeholders to be aligned in messaging, advising, and onboarding. For instance, institutions must commit to engage with new post-traditional learners and states can engage state agencies to share information with residents who are collecting unemployment insurance and TANF benefits. Institutions should work to quickly connect prospective learners to navigators who can support them through the exploration, admission, and registration process, and beyond.

Comprehensive campaigns should incorporate information on time, cost, and return on investment and should strive to resonate with post-traditional learners by using images of older students and language about connecting learning to tangible career goals, as noted above. They should highlight accessibility, flexibility and affordability as much as possible.

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[1]   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

CASE STUDY

Statewide Strategy for Adult Learners: Washington State's Affordability and Adult Re-engagement Agenda

BACKGROUND

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) acknowledged that the state was not going to reach its postsecondary attainment goals without an intentional strategy targeting those over the age of 25. This agenda became a top priority when the state's strategic plan set goals around enrollment and completion of post-traditional learners. The suite of programs and interventions include statewide financial aid for adults, adult reengagement strategies, as well as pilots for pre-enrollment coaching, peer recruitment, micro-grants, and cross-agency collaborations.

Affordability. In 2020, the state converted its large need-based scholarship from a discretionary budget line into an entitlement program. The Washington College Grant provides free public tuition for five years at public institutions as well as participating nonprofit, private career schools, and approved apprenticeships. The expansion of the state grant had important implications for post-traditional learners: 1) it has no age cutoff; 2) it is available to part-time and full-time students; and 3) families earning up to the median income are eligible.[19] Award amounts are allocated in a similar manner as the Pell grant: low-income students get the maximum award and higher income students a smaller amount. In addition to the Washington College Grant, the state offers financial aid for students pursuing degrees in high demand fields at community colleges, as well as funding for workforce training programs.

Adult Re-engagement Strategy. Launched in March of 2020 with support from Lumina Foundation, College and Career Compass (Compass) is a digital tool that helps post-traditional learners navigate and explore educational programs, has a digital backpack that includes various topics, and offers users tips and questions they might want to ask when they reach out to a campus. The tool then connects users directly to the campus through a short contact form. Campuses participating in the tool made commitments to improve their supports for post-traditional learners.

The state's comprehensive agenda purposefully connects affordability with post-traditional learner reengagement, in which the College Grant has been central to the outreach campaign. Building on the combined affordability and reengagement agenda, the state has piloted peer-recruitment for post-traditional learners in their communities, micro-grants as an incentive for learner reengagement (e.g. parking fee waivers, forgiveness of previously incurred educational debt with the exception of student loans), and a pre-enrollment coaching initiative.

GETTING STARTED

Partnering with institutions was crucial to create a statewide system to identify and support post-traditional learners. The first step was to convene an advisory team with representatives from institutions. The state's financial aid reform, as well as Lumina's funding for Compass, allowed WSAC to build momentum for the statewide post-traditional learner agenda.

As part of the development of Compass, the team at WSAC worked on campus engagement and approached stakeholders in a manner that was sensitive to their needs and capacity. The idea was for the tool to promote improvements in the way institutions serve post-traditional learners. By asking institutions to complete a self-assessment, WSAC mapped existing policies and practices, facilitated learning among participating institutions, and identified best practices. Ultimately, results from the self-assessment informed the development of strategies to support post-traditional learners and a campus plan to respond to student leads from Compass. After the assessment, WSAC signed an agreement with each institution outlining both the state and institution commitments toward improvement.

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[19] The state used research on a previous pilot showing that supporting part-time enrollment for those students unable to commit full-time led to increased retention. Data also showed that as those students made progress towards their degrees, their enrollment levels went up.

GETTING TO SCALE

While the launch of Compass involved a statewide messaging campaign where the state partnered with a marketing firm to create the brand and advance a media campaign, WSAC tried to find additional ways to make adults aware of Compass. For that purpose, the state partnered with the College Adult Prospective Pipeline (College APP). College APP took consumer marketing data and created a variable about intention to pursue postsecondary education and affinity for a two-year, four-year, public, or private institution. Next, they launched a survey and used the results to identify those who had a high likelihood of pursuing postsecondary education. Next, emails and a social media campaign targeted those individuals. A high-level official at WSAC reported that this type of partnership can help states and institutions improve their outreach to prospective post-traditional learners.

All public and some private institutions in the state have signed agreements to participate in Compass. Although a number of private four-year institutions were not participating, their interest changed when the tool began to be offered to high school students during the pandemic, and uncertainty about future enrollments was high. WSAC then decided to include all institutions in Compass, but institutions that sign an agreement to evaluate and improve services for post-traditional learners and report outcomes receive "leads" through the tool.

The Washington College Grant and College and Career Compass built momentum for WSAC to expand the agenda for post-traditional learners by collaborating with other state agencies. WSAC is currently aligning and strengthening policies such as academic credit for prior learning, and working to streamline and coordinate access to public benefits and financial aid programs by evaluating and addressing administrative barriers.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

1. Think outside the box when it comes to outreach strategies. Deep community engagement with local non-profits, leaders in faith communities and other groups that provide targeted support for learners can push states and institutions to be innovative. See the Partnerships Action Guide for more strategies;

2. Provide an inclusive set of pathways for post-traditional learners, without assumptions as to which might best suit their needs, engaging both two- and four-year institutions. A context of innovative enrollment strategies as a result of the pandemic may set the stage for more institutions to serve post-traditional learners well; and

3. Start with data integration if you are considering cross-agency collaborations to streamline financial aid and public benefits. See Colorado's case study in the Data Action Guide to learn more.

→ TO IMPROVE

Orient marketing materials around post-traditional learners

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	All

Prospective post-traditional learners are more likely to rely heavily on online resources during the college search process, compared to traditional students who may have time to visit various campuses during their college search process. Therefore, institutions and states should intentionally orient marketing materials to adult learners. Institutional websites should be relatable to the lived experience of adult students. New America notes that post-traditional learners who engaged in postsecondary education in the past and are considering returning are looking for confirmation that the education or training is feasible.[20]

According to Hanover Research, adults prefer information that is easy to access and use, with messages tailored to show an understanding of the unique needs of post-traditional learners.[21] Imagery showing adult students engaged in learning and working in jobs relevant to their educational goals are effective in marketing your program. Consider having a separate webpage for post-traditional learners, which can provide a streamlined web experience for prospective adult students. Make sure the site has search engine optimization, which makes it easier for prospective learners to find the site and locate information within the site. Additional recommendations on messaging can be found in the next section, *be transparent about the time, cost and value of programs.*

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[20] 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

[21] Hanover Research. (2018). *Best practices in course scheduling.* https://www.cmich.edu/colleges/se/Documents/Hanover%20Research%20-%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Course%20Scheduling.pdf

Exemplars

Indiana created the Workforce Ready Grant in 2016 to cover tuition and fees for students enrolled in certificate programs. Understanding that adult-centered outreach must emphasize connections to jobs and careers, Indiana launched Next Level Jobs. The website provides individuals access to information about the Workforce Ready Grant and the ability to explore job opportunities in the high-demand industries connected to the grant. The latest results for the Workforce Ready Grant show almost 39,000 enrollees and nearly 18,000 certificate completers.

Pueblo Community College (PCC) in Colorado operates the Return to Earn program to get former students without a credential or degree to reenroll at the institution. The Pueblo Community College website clearly articulates the economic value of certificates and associate degrees. In addition, PCC has added information to explain how students can access support services during the pandemic, as well as targeting former students who stopped out during the fall 2020 semester due to COVID-19.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

1   Go to your website and test out the number of clicks it takes to get information on cost of attendance; ensure the online user experience is optimized for the post-traditional learner; and

2   Conduct focus groups with post-traditional students to review the language used in marketing materials and on your website to be sure that the information is clear and their priorities—finances, program flexibility, child care, job prospect—are reflected in the materials.

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[25] Education Strategy Group. (2020). *A more unified community college: Strategies and resources to align non-credit and credit pathways in community colleges.* http://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-More-Unified-Community-College_FINAL.pdf

 TO IMPROVE

Be transparent about the time, cost and value of programs

STAKEHOLDERS:	POST-TRADITIONAL POPULATIONS TO CONSIDER:
Institutions, States	All

The next step requires institutions and states to provide easy to understand information about the cost, time, and value of programs to post-traditional learners. Among the many programs and types of credentials available, learners have a difficult time knowing which education or training experience will lead to the type of return they are seeking. Post-traditional learners want programs that are relevant, infused with skills, lead to a high-demand career, and are connected to their existing work, when possible. Creating programs that meet learners where they are, communicate the return on the credential, and address their primary goals is essential. Because this will differ by specific populations and skill levels, efforts should be paired with resources that help identify learners' career interests and that take into account the learners' existing skills and experiences.

Clear information about program cost can be achieved through simplified cost and aid structures. Institutional and state leaders should strive to simplify the systems used to determine cost so that post-traditional learners can better understand them. Clarity on the time it will take to complete the program is another key piece of information that students need to determine value. Information on time should include the number of credits required to earn the credential and program duration, taking into consideration both full-time and part-time enrollment status. If cost is differentiated by length of enrollment, rather than number of credits, that should be made clear. Finally, data on employment and wages will be of interest to students as they seek to understand the return on their investment.

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[22] Education Advisory Board. (2020). *Is your college designed for post-traditional learners? 13 strategies to ensure you aren't underserving today's community college student.* https://pages.eab.com/rs/732-GKV-655/images/NAV-PostTraditionalWP-PDF.pdf

[23] Strada Institute for the Future of Work. (2020). *The new learning ecosystem.* Strada Education Network. https://www.stradaeducation.org/report/the-new-learning-ecosystem/

[24] 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

Exemplars

Mississippi's Complete to Compete (C2C) seeks to eliminate barriers for adult learners with some college but no degree. The program operates in Mississippi's eight public universities, 15 community colleges, and the medical center. In 2017, C2C launched a tailored website to easily communicate the program's process, cost, and additional benefits, including a personal coach and grant information. So far, the program has awarded 2191 degrees.

Monroe Community College in Upstate New York invested in developing a data office with the tools needed to identify high-wage and high-demand areas. They track over 100 local and regional occupations and use the data to inform both learners and employers.[25] Learners are able to go to EWDC's site and look up labor market data by workforce cluster and region. Within each specific field, learners can see position demand by the number of openings and new positions created, wage data, churn and attrition rate within the field, top skills in the field, top employers, and top certifications.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

1 Institutions and systems should provide simple calculators related to cost and value of programs of study; and

2 Data on demand for a given credential as it relates to occupations and the number of openings across the region helps to communicate the value of the program and credential.

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[25] Education Strategy Group. (2020). *A more unified community college: Strategies and resources to align non-credit and credit pathways in community colleges.* http://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-More-Unified-Community-College_FINAL.pdf