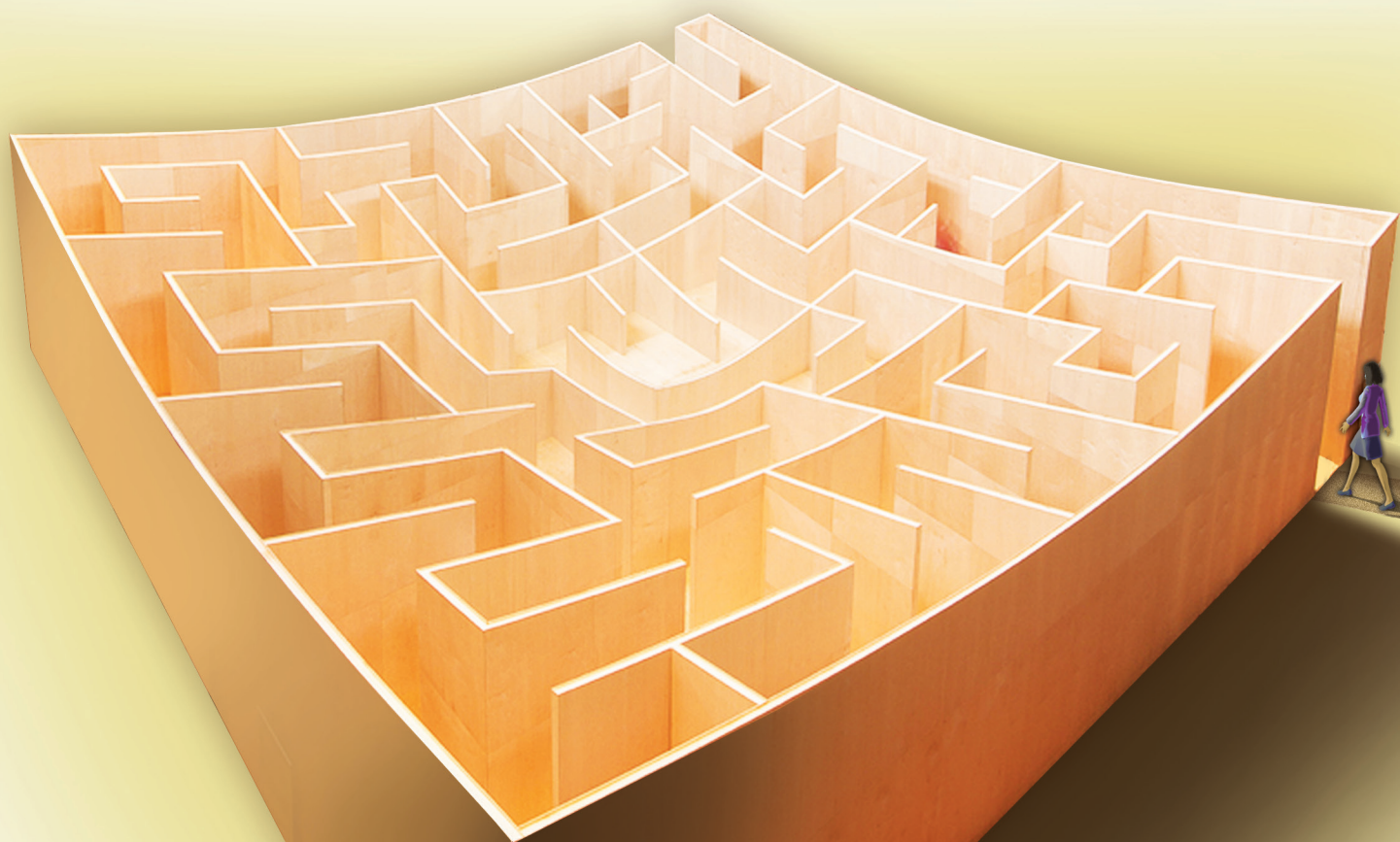


ADULT COLLEGE COMPLETION

IN THE 21st CENTURY

WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DON'T



WENDY ERISMAN
PATRICIA STEELE
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HIGHER ED INSIGHT

Cover art by Rod Little (www.informationillustration.com)
Design and layout by Mónica Sanjur (www.sacs.carbonmade.com)

From the Authors

Lumina Foundation, in working toward the goal of ensuring that 60 percent of Americans have obtained a high-quality postsecondary credential by 2025, recognizes that this goal is only attainable if higher education access efforts expand their focus beyond traditional-age students who enter college directly from high school to promoting higher education opportunities for older students. In 2010 Lumina funded 10 large-scale projects aimed at serving adult students with some college but no degree. Together with several related Lumina-funded projects, these grantees were provided financial support and the opportunity to form the core of a new Adult College Completion Network, funded by Lumina and managed by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (*see Appendix A for brief descriptions of the participating projects*).

This report is the culmination of four years of data collection and literature review that we pursued as a part of Higher Ed Insight's evaluation of Lumina Foundation's adult college completion efforts. The focus of the evaluation, conducted from 2010 to 2014, was to highlight critical early lessons that could be learned from Lumina-funded and related projects about the services and supports adults with some college credit need if they are to return to college and successfully complete a degree or credential. Throughout the evaluation, much of the information gathered through site visits, interviews, and surveys of grantees has been shared with grantees, and others in the adult college completion community through various channels. This report draws from that data along with resources and lessons learned developed by all those working toward greater success among adults with some college credit, far beyond just the projects funded by Lumina Foundation.

Our hope is that this report contributes to the field by offering an overview of what we know, and what we do not yet know, about this important population of returning adult college students.

Wendy Erisman & Patricia Steele

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Executive Summary

Interest in adult college completion, both for adults with some college credit and those who have never before attended college, has dramatically increased across the higher education community. This report draws from the considerable body of recent research focused on various populations of adult learners, including data gathered during Higher Ed Insight's recent evaluation of Lumina Foundation's adult college completion efforts. The goal of the report is to synthesize what has been learned about the needs of adult college students, particularly those returning to college after stopping out, as well as to identify areas where further inquiry is needed in order to demonstrate effective ways to support degree completion for adults.

We know quite a bit more about the specific population of adults with some college credit than we did five years ago, information that should be helpful to policymakers and higher education leaders as they plan for a future where adults make up an even larger portion of the postsecondary student body. However, much of what we know about adult learners in general is not new. The problem is that this knowledge about the differences between traditional college students and adult learners has not been factored into the pedagogy and operations of nearly enough colleges and universities. Higher education faces a new reality, one where many students are not recent high school graduates and education is no longer constrained by time and space. Colleges must adapt and better serve adults for whom a chance, or a second chance, at higher education can make such a difference in their lives.

In particular, adults returning to college to complete a degree need a higher education system that is more affordable, flexible, and student-centered than the one that currently exists. To serve these students, higher education must promote innovative ways to deliver course

content and assess student outcomes, develop more effective student support systems, and forge closer connections to workforce and industry. Colleges and universities must also become more intentional about addressing the needs of this population, if for no other reason, because these students have already invested considerable resources in college without getting a credential, and some accountability is required to ensure that these students can benefit from that investment in the long run.

This report does not identify any one model for successfully increasing degree completion among adults with some college credit, but it does highlight important lessons learned about outreach to adults as well as the services and academic supports they need for success. Notably, many of the most significant challenges for returning adults students are rooted in policies and practices that are barriers for all students, which means that improvements in these areas may also improve postsecondary retention and completion more broadly and thus provide a substantial return on investment for colleges and universities willing to undertake a process of change.



Understanding Adults with Some College Credit

What We Know

- A substantial number of Americans—some-where between 30 and 35 million—have enrolled in college but have not completed a degree or certificate that would enhance their future job prospects as well as the competitiveness of the wider U.S. economy.
- Adults with some college but no degree are a diverse and complex population, and there is a significant lack of data on demographics and educational characteristics for this group.
- Recent analysis of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data on non-first-time students indicates that, among students who stopped out for at least a year and then returned to college, only about a third completed a credential in six to eight years, compared to more than half of first-time students. Completion rates were lower for non-first-time students than for first-time students in all institutional sectors. Students who were at least 25 when they re-enrolled in college had lower completion rates than younger non-first-time students (NSC 2015).
- Career advancement is a primary motivation for many adults returning to college, making it crucial for institutions to ensure that degree programs aimed at adults with some college credit will provide them with the appropriate skills and credentials to achieve their goals.
- Adult students returning to college face serious barriers to both re-enrollment and degree completion. Many of these learners originally left college due to financial challenges and difficulties with balancing life, work, and school, and those challenges are still a part of their lives.

What We Don't Know

- ▶ Which returning adult students are most likely to succeed in completing a degree? Are there differences in demographic factors such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, income, and parental status, as well as academic factors such as type(s) of postsecondary institution attended, number of credits earned, and stop-out length that are correlated with re-enrollment, retention, and completion for this population?
- ▶ Why are completion rates for non-first-time students markedly higher in some states than in others?

Marketing and Outreach to Prospective Adult Students

What We Know

- Typical college recruiting methods are less effective with adult students. Not only are prospective adult students more difficult to locate than their traditional-age counterparts, but research suggests that many adults obtain information about colleges from family, friends, community groups, and colleagues rather than from more official sources.
- Direct outreach to former students by a postsecondary institution or system can be time-consuming and expensive and does not seem to yield enormous results. Electronic outreach methods such as email and social media are more cost-effective than other outreach approaches.
- Near-completers, students who have completed a substantial amount of credit towards a degree, are rather difficult to re-enroll. While these students are undoubtedly an important target group, it may prove easier to enroll students who have been out of college for shorter times or who have strong economic motivations to complete a credential.

- Media outreach, using messages that resonate with adults, may be the most effective route for reaching adults with some college credit. Such advertising has been used effectively by for-profit postsecondary institutions that also target adult students.
- Web portals that address questions about returning to college and provide information on degree completion programs can be an important tool for reaching adults with some college credit, but they must be better publicized so that adults will find them when doing web searches about college.

What We Don't Know

- ▶ Do direct outreach campaigns yield an adequate return on investment? Which former students are the best targets for such campaigns and what are the most cost-effective ways to reach them?
- ▶ What kind of investment in media will it take for public and private non-profit institutions to compete with for-profit institutions for returning adult students? Will this investment result in sufficient returns to make it worthwhile?
- ▶ How do adult students navigate through college and university websites? How can institutions make their websites friendlier to prospective adult students?
- ▶ What needs to be done to ensure that prospective adult students are aware of key sources of information about returning to college?

Institutional Services for Adult Students

What We Know

- Promoting college access and success for adults will require many postsecondary institutions to change both the services they offer to students and how those services are

implemented. Disaggregating institutional data to track outcomes for adult students is central to this process.

- Admissions procedures are a major bottleneck for adults with some college credit when they try to return to college. In order for any outreach method to work, colleges and universities must ensure that queries from prospective adult students are met with timely and relevant information.
- Returning adult students want to know how long it will take and how much it will cost to complete a degree program. Providing a more transparent process to help students understand the extent to which their credits will transfer prior to enrollment, including online degree audit tools, should be standard service for these students.
- At a minimum, institutions should direct prospective and current adult students to advisors who can offer assistance with the questions unique to this population such as issues with the transferability of credit from multiple institutions and information on credit for prior learning.
- Adult students may find it difficult to access student services if those services are only available on campus during regular business hours. Solutions to this problem include opening student support services offices on a weekday evening or a weekend, providing as much information as possible online, creating adult-focused orientation sessions, student success class sections, short workshops on key topics, and centralizing services in an adult-focused office or student center.
- Adult students need more sources of financial aid, particularly at the state level. Partnerships with workforce and public benefits agencies can help institutions develop more sources of financial support for their adult students.



What We Don't Know

- ▶ To what extent have the institutions that have made changes to services to become more adult-friendly yielded higher retention and completion rates among this population? Do different approaches to offering services produce different student outcomes?
- ▶ How can financial aid programs at all levels be adapted to better support adult students, particularly those who enroll less than half-time and/or in non-credit career and technical programs?

Promoting Academic Success for Adult Learners

What We Know

- Adult learners strongly prefer active learning, self-directed learning, and classroom learning relevant to real-world settings, as well as flexible learning settings such as online courses, but faculty members may need support in adopting new instructional approaches.
- Academic programs that can be of particular value for returning adult students include targeted and accelerated degree-completion programs and career pathways programs that offer stackable and latticed credentials, including industry-recognized credentials.
- Flexible learning opportunities such as online courses, night and weekend courses, and accelerated or modular course formats where students can enroll, stop and re-enroll can help adults overcome the challenges of balancing college with work and other responsibilities.
- Students age 25 and older perform less well in online classes than they do in face-to-face classes, but the drop in performance is less pronounced than for younger students, leading researchers to suggest that the flexibility of online learning versus a small

drop in academic performance may be a reasonable trade-off for working adults.

- Returning adults, or older students enrolling in college for the first time, come to college with a wide variety of learning under their belts, and returning adult students see opportunities to receive credit for prior learning as an important factor in achieving their educational goals. However, policies on prior learning assessment (PLA) vary from one campus to another, and implementing PLA at the institutional, state, or system level requires an investment of time and resources in building faculty engagement, developing effective PLA policies, and ensuring students are aware of these policies.
- Competency-based education (CBE) programs are growing and are likely here to stay. These programs emphasize advancement based on skills mastery, self-pacing, and customized instruction and are well-suited to many returning adult students, but questions remain about the quality and cost of such programs.

What We Don't Know

- ▶ Which flexible scheduling and course delivery options are best suited to particular types of adult students? Which produce the best student outcomes? Is the quality of instruction and the level of learning the same in these courses as in traditional face-to-face courses? What can be done to better support students enrolled in online classes in order to improve outcomes?
- ▶ Which approaches to PLA are most accessible for adult students? Do students who obtain credit for prior learning perform well in subsequent classes? How can postsecondary institutions and systems effectively implement PLA at a larger scale than has been achieved thus far?

- ▶ What are the job placement outcomes for online and CBE degree programs? To what extent are online and CBE programs more or less desirable than traditional programs for employers? Do online and CBE programs differ from traditional programs in terms of persistence, completion, employment, and earnings outcomes?
- ▶ What can the higher education community learn from the experiences of long-standing adult-focused institutions in areas such as PLA, transfer of credit, and support for active military and veteran students?
- ▶ To what extent will industry-recognized credentials, badges, micro-degrees, and other credentials offered outside of postsecondary institutions play a role in advancing adult degree completion?

Strategic Partnerships to Support Adult College Completion

What We Know

- Partnerships have emerged to support adult college completion such as the Adult College Completion Network (ACCN), as well as statewide institutional partnerships among adult-friendly institutions. These networks have provided an important resource for shared learning among participants.
- City and regional partnerships designed to increase postsecondary completion rates have found it difficult to reach and re-enroll adults with some college credit, but nonetheless seem to be important to building options for place-bound adult students. Strategies currently being tried include developing one-stop information centers for adults with some college credit, often using the model pioneered by the Graduate! Network, and partnerships with industry to provide college completion options for current employees.

What We Don't Know

- ▶ What are the most effective ways of collecting and disseminating information about adults with some college credit, using existing national, regional, and local partnerships? Are other partnerships or means of dissemination needed?
- ▶ Which of the strategies being tried by community partnerships are effective in re-enrolling adults with some college credit and are those approaches cost-effective?

While this report provides a comprehensive overview of what we know about adult students in higher education today, more specific research is needed to determine what specific practices yield significant outcomes, as well as more consensus on how to define those outcomes. We also need more research to determine which programmatic approaches are the most effective at helping adults persist in college and complete credentials and the impact of those approaches on individual earnings and workforce opportunity. More studies with control group comparisons and cost-benefit estimates of different approaches are needed to make programmatic recommendations for institutions. To this end, those who are working to implement innovative approaches to serving this population need to gather evidence and document their work, so information on best practices can be widely disseminated.



Introduction

Interest in adult college completion, both for adults with some college credit and those who have never before attended college, has dramatically increased across the higher education community. States have undertaken large-scale efforts to reach out to adults with some college credit and assist them in returning to school. Both public policy and legislative action have begun to address the educational needs of active military personnel and veterans, the vast majority of whom have earned college credit or gained applicable college-level knowledge and skills during their military service. Postsecondary institutions and national higher education associations have begun to implement wider opportunities for adults who return to college to gain credit for prior learning. Projects related to alternative approaches to earning postsecondary credentials, most notably competency-based education, have also made a splash in the higher education community. The federal government, in particular, has demonstrated interest in credit for prior learning and competency-based education through its creation of an experimental sites project that waives certain federal financial aid regulations for selected postsecondary institutions using these approaches (U.S. Department of Education 2014).

Foundations have also been active players in work on higher education for adult learners. In particular, Lumina Foundation in 2010 launched an adult college completion initiative that included 10 large-scale projects aimed at increasing college completion among adult students with some college credit but no degree or certificate. Together with seven Lumina-funded projects working in areas related to adult college completion, these grantees were provided financial support and the opportunity to form the core of a new Adult College Completion Network (*see Appendix A for descriptions of these projects*). Building on the experiences of these projects, Lumina has since funded research on the demographics and educational pathways of postsecondary non-completers, supported an effort to develop a sustainable business model for colleges focused on adult degree completion, and sponsored a number of regional, state, and national initiatives around credit for prior learning and competency-

based education, including providing funds for the emerging Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN). This report assesses lessons learned and questions raised both by the Lumina-funded projects mentioned above and by other projects that provide complementary perspectives to help illustrate the benefits and challenges associated with promoting degree completion for adults with some college credit.

Understanding Adults with Some College Credit

Adults with some college credit but no postsecondary credential have been noted as an important target population in recent efforts to increase postsecondary attainment in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) states that approximately 17% of Americans age 25 and older have some college credit but no degree. Recent research on certificate attainment using data from



the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) indicates that, as of 2009, about 14% of Americans age 23 to 65 had earned some college credit but no credential while 12% held a vocational certificate as their highest credential (Carnevale, Rose, and Hanson 2012). Data from a more recent SIPP panel used expanded measures of educational attainment to tease out some of the differences among various forms of alternative credentials such as licenses, certifications, and certificates. According to an analysis of that data, approximately 10% of individuals age 18 and older who have some college but no degree have earned a certificate (Ewert and Kominski 2014). While none of these analyses provides an exact number, it is clear that a substantial number of Americans—somewhere between 30 and 35 million—have enrolled in college but not completed a degree or certificate that would enhance their future job prospects as well as the competitiveness of the wider U.S. economy.

As the discussion above indicates, one challenge for funders and higher education practitioners has been the lack of data about students who left college with no certificate or degree. In 2014, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) used its extensive database to identify over 31 million students who had left college after at least one term but without earning a credential. This analysis determined that almost a third of these students (32%) enrolled for only one term, suggesting that they, like adults with no college experience, have a considerable way to go before earning a credential. On the other hand, 12% or over 3.5 million of the non-completers in the NSC sample had earned at least two years of college credit within the last 10 years, demonstrating that there is clearly a substantial population of potential degree completers who might be persuaded to return to college (Shapiro et al 2014).

One thing experts are sure of is that adults with some college but no degree are a diverse and complex population. Demographic factors such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, income, and parental

status, as well as academic factors such as type(s) of postsecondary institution attended, number of credits earned, and stop-out length, can all play a role in whether or not an individual is a likely candidate for degree completion. Situational factors matter, as well, particularly employment status and obligations towards dependents. While the sections below outline what is currently known about adults with some college credit, more research is needed to understand these many factors and their interrelationships.

Demographics

Despite a spate of new research, demographic information on adults with some college credit continues to be hard to come by. The 2014 NSC study provides the clearest look at adults with relatively recent college credits (*See Figure 1*). Among non-completers who enrolled in at least two terms of higher education since 1993, 53% were female and 47% were male. One-quarter (25%) of these non-completers would have been age 24-29 as of December 2013, more than a third (36%) would have been age 30-39, 18% age 40-49, and 21% age 50 and older. Male non-completers tended to be younger than females—66% of males in the sample would have been age 24-39 in December 2013 versus 56% of females in the sample (Shapiro et al 2014). The NSC data does not include race/ethnicity, but some information can be gleaned from the 2008 SIPP panel, which indicates that, in 2009, among adults age 25 and older with some college but no degree or certificate, 72% were white, 12% were black, 11% Hispanic, and 5% other races or ethnicities (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

An evaluation of Grad TX, a degree-completion website developed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, surveyed two groups: prospective returning adult students (visitors to the Grad TX website) and returning adult students who were enrolled in one of the degree-completion



programs promoted by the website. A comparison of the demographics of these two populations, while not generalizable, offer some interesting points to consider (see Figure 2). The students who were actually enrolled in degree-completion programs were more likely than those visiting the website to be white, female, and less than 40 years old. Students over age 40, and particularly those over age 50, as well as Hispanic students and male students, made up a smaller portion of the enrolled students than of the prospective students (Rapaport and Rolf 2013). This finding raises questions about the extent to which demographics may play a role in the ability of certain adults to return to college to complete a degree.

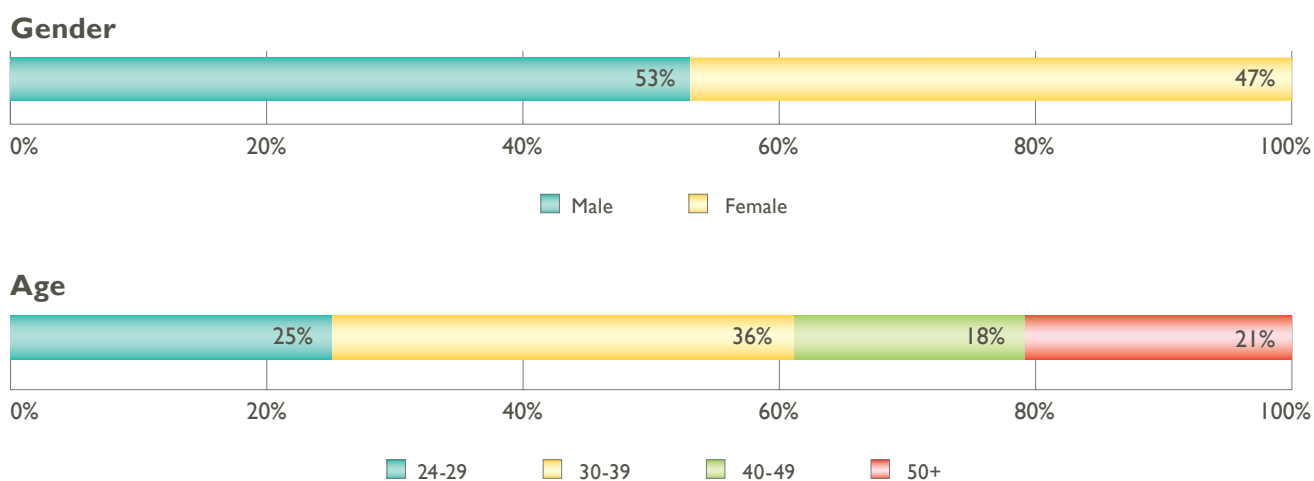
Enrollment and Completion Patterns

According to the 2014 NSC analysis, non-completers who enrolled for at least two terms and are not currently enrolled were most likely to have been enrolled in two-year colleges (56%), followed by four-year colleges (27%), and a mix of the two institutional types (17%). Among this group of non-completers, nearly two-thirds had been away

from college less than two years (35%) or two to three years (28%), with smaller percentages stopping out for four to six years (20%), seven to nine years (9%), or 10 years or more (8%) (see Figure 3). In addition, among students who had left college more than three years before the data was examined, nearly 90% had stopped out at least once in the past, while 71% of those who had been away from college for 10 years or more had stopped out at least twice in the past and 22% had stopped out more than three times (Shapiro et al 2014). These last findings show a pattern of adult students who have tried repeatedly and without success to complete a degree or certificate and who clearly need additional support if they are to be successful in the future.

The Grad TX survey of adults enrolled in degree-completion programs also shows some interesting patterns in terms of stop-outs. While 40% of the survey respondents had stopped out for less than two years, only 17% had stopped out for two to five years. On the other end of the spectrum, 14% had stopped out for five to 10 years and 29% had stopped out for 10 years of more (Rapaport

FIGURE I: Demographics of U.S. Adults with Some College but No Degree or Certificate, 2013



Source: Shapiro, Doug, Afet Dundar, Xin Yuan, Autumn T. Harrell, Justin C. Wild, and Mary B. Ziskin. 2014. *Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.



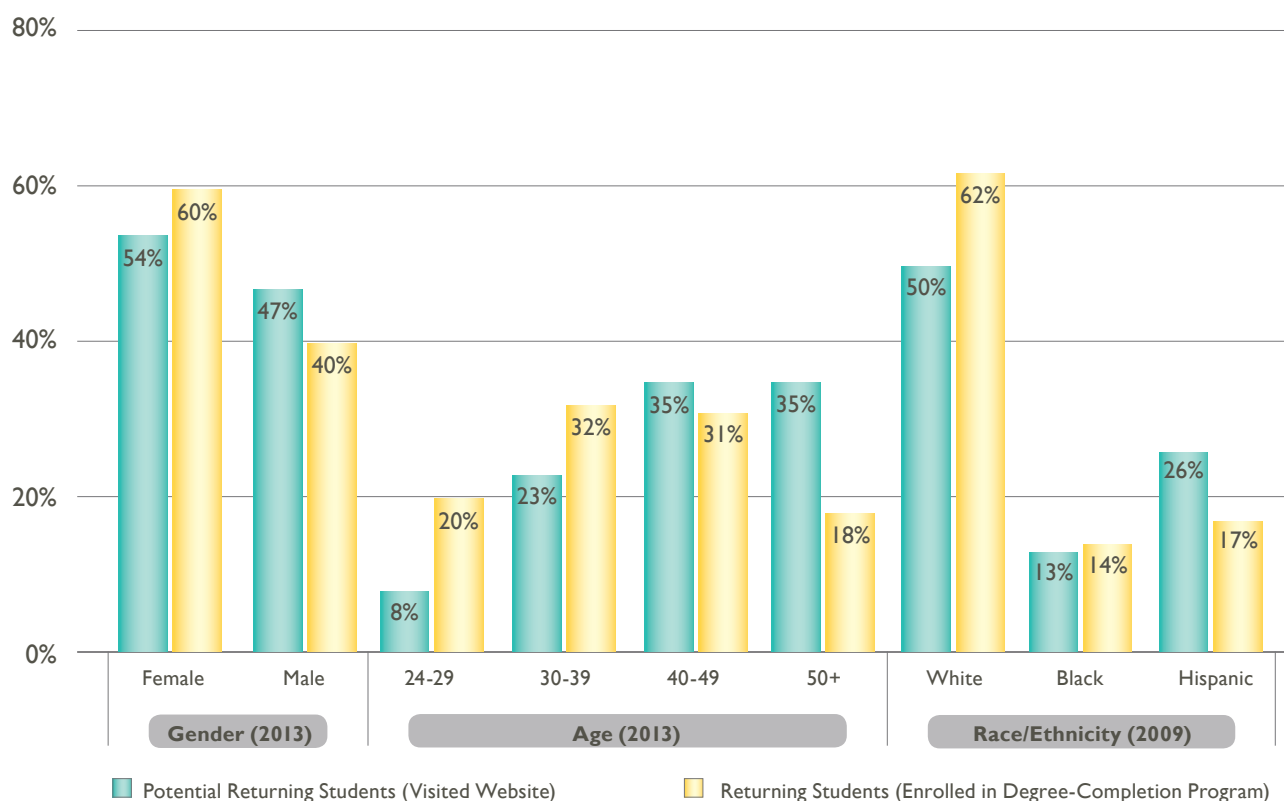
and Rolf 2013). This pattern suggests that there may be windows of opportunity at which it is possible to recapture some stop-outs—with one window occurring soon after an initial stop-out and another occurring much further down the road, presumably after the individual’s work and family life have stabilized or when they are in need of career advancement or a new job.

As of yet little is known about the enrollment and completion patterns of returning adult students, although one study has found that adult learners working on bachelor’s degrees took, on average, five years to complete, even after transferring in an average 52 credits (University Professional and Continuing Education Association and Hobsons 2014). A new NSC study of non-first-time students, the initial findings from which were

released in March 2015, offers some interesting points to consider.¹ Only about a quarter (24%) of these returning students were enrolled full-time while nearly half (46%) were enrolled exclusively part-time and the remainder mixed full- and part-time enrollment at various times, suggesting that time to completion for most of these students will likely be longer due to lower enrollment intensity. However, returning students were also more likely to enroll in sectors other than community colleges. While nearly two-thirds (65%) of this group were enrolled in community colleges when they stopped out, only about half (49%) enrolled in community colleges on their return, with the remainder

¹ This study includes students of all ages who left college without earning an associates’ or bachelor’s degree, stopped out at least a year, and re-enrolled between August 2005 and August 2008. Approximately two-thirds (68%) of the students in this dataset were age 25 or older at the time of re-enrollment.

FIGURE 2: Demographics of Potential and Current Returning Adult Students, Grad TX, 2013



Source: Rapaport, Amie, and Cheyanne Rolf. 2013. Adult Degree Completion Comprehensive Report. Austin, TX: Gibson Consulting Group.



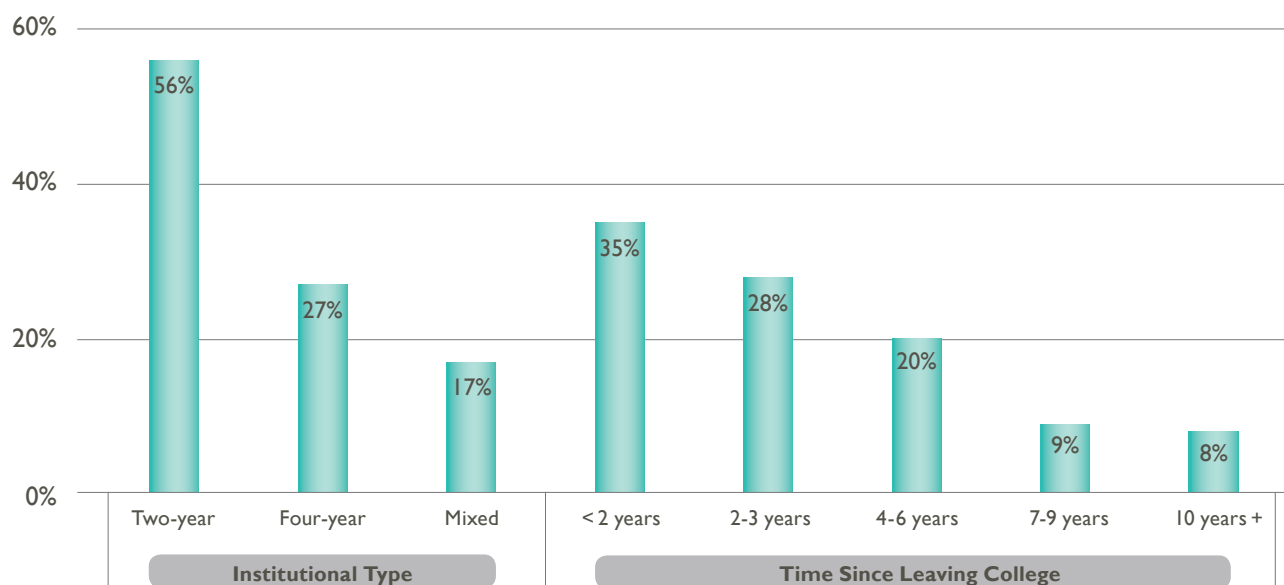
distributed across institutions in the public four-year (29%), private non-profit (14%), and for-profit (8%) sectors (NSC 2015).

In addition, the NSC data indicate that, among students who stopped out for at least a year and then returned to college, only about a third (34%) completed a credential in six to eight years, compared to more than half (54%) of first-time students. Completion rates were lower for non-first-time students than for first-time students in all institutional sectors, with the highest completion rates for returning students found at private non-profit four-year institutions (53%) and public four-year institutions (44%). Returning students in certain states had notably higher completion rates than in others, raising crucial questions about what those states may be doing to support non-first-time students (InsideTrack 2014). Completion rates were also somewhat lower for students who were at least 25 when they re-enrolled in college than for younger non-first-time students (31% versus 40%),

suggesting that adults with some college credit face particular barriers to completing a degree (NSC 2015).

The NSC data show that non-first-time students who enrolled full-time were more likely to complete bachelor's degrees in six years (34% versus 25% mixed enrollment and 7% part-time). However, students with mixed enrollment patterns were more likely to complete an associate's degree in the same time frame (16% versus 10% full-time and 7% part-time). Overall, including certificates, the completion rates for students with mixed enrollment intensity were only slightly lower than those of students enrolled exclusively full-time (45% versus 49%). In addition, while students enrolled exclusively part-time were most likely to have dropped out by the end of the study period (75%), those enrolled exclusively full-time were more likely to have dropped out than those with mixed enrollment (48% versus 37%), suggesting that, for at least some students, mixed enrollment

FIGURE 3: U.S. Adults with Some College Credit but No Degree or Certificate by Institutional Type and Time Since Leaving College, 2013



Source: Shapiro, Doug, Afet Dundar, Xin Yuan, Autumn T. Harrell, Justin C. Wild, and Mary B. Ziskin. 2014. *Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.



may be beneficial to longer-term persistence and completion (InsideTrack 2015).

Reasons for Leaving College

A number of studies have addressed the question of why non-traditional students leave college without graduating, and most emphasize financial difficulties and the challenge of balancing school and other adult responsibilities. Notably, academic problems are typically much lower on the list. For instance, an analysis of records from coaching sessions with more than 45,000 students from 17 postsecondary institutions served by the educational consulting firm InsideTrack provides insight into the reasons why students stop out or drop out of college. Over half of these students (56%) reported one of two reasons—finances (30%) or difficulties in managing multiple commitments (26%)—while less than 7% indicated that they were dropping out for academic reasons (Dreckmeier and Tichman 2010).

These two broad categories are consistently found in other analyses of students' reasons for leaving college. In a survey of students seeking to earn credit for prior learning through LearningCounts.org, the top two reasons given for not finishing college were the need to work and earn money (45%) and the very general, but resonant, response of “life got in the way” (41%). On that survey, which allowed for more than one response, respondents also indicated that work responsibilities (25%), caring for family (21%), and the inability to afford college (16%) were reasons for dropping out (Zalek 2013). Similarly, on the Grad TX survey of students enrolled in degree completion programs, the top two reasons for leaving college were financial concerns (47%) and scheduling problems (36%). A number of students also volunteered answers on the survey, and the most commonly mentioned of those answers was getting married and/or starting a family (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

A 2013 survey of non-completers conducted by Ivy Tech Community College offers some finer-grained information about reasons why students left the college (Ninon 2013). Students were allowed to give more than one response, and the broad categories of responses included personal reasons (45%), academic reasons (31%), financial issues (24%), employment issues (21%), and scheduling (14%). However, a look at the top two reasons given within each of these categories shows that there is considerable overlap among them and that many of the problems these students faced related to financial challenges or the challenge of being a student with many responsibilities (*see Figure 4*). Responses to a survey of students who had stopped out of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) institutions and then re-enrolled produced similar findings. Students identified the following major reasons for stopping out: non-financial personal circumstances (47%), nonfinancial family circumstances (34%), hard to combine school and job (32%), and could not afford tuition/costs (27%) (Wilder Research 2015).

Motivations for Returning to College

In a 2015 survey of adults age 25 to 44 without a college degree, about two-thirds (67%) of those who had completed some college indicated that they would like to return to school to complete a credential. The highest credential to which these prospective completers aspire included a certificate (7%), an associate's degree (14%), a bachelor's degree (31%), or a graduate degree (15%). In addition, nearly a quarter (23%) of survey respondents with some college credit said they will probably or definitely return to college within the next year (Kelly 2015). These findings indicate that there is considerable motivation among adults with some college credit to return to college. Moreover, the specific motivations adult students report when asked about returning to college are quite consistent over a range of data. These motivations



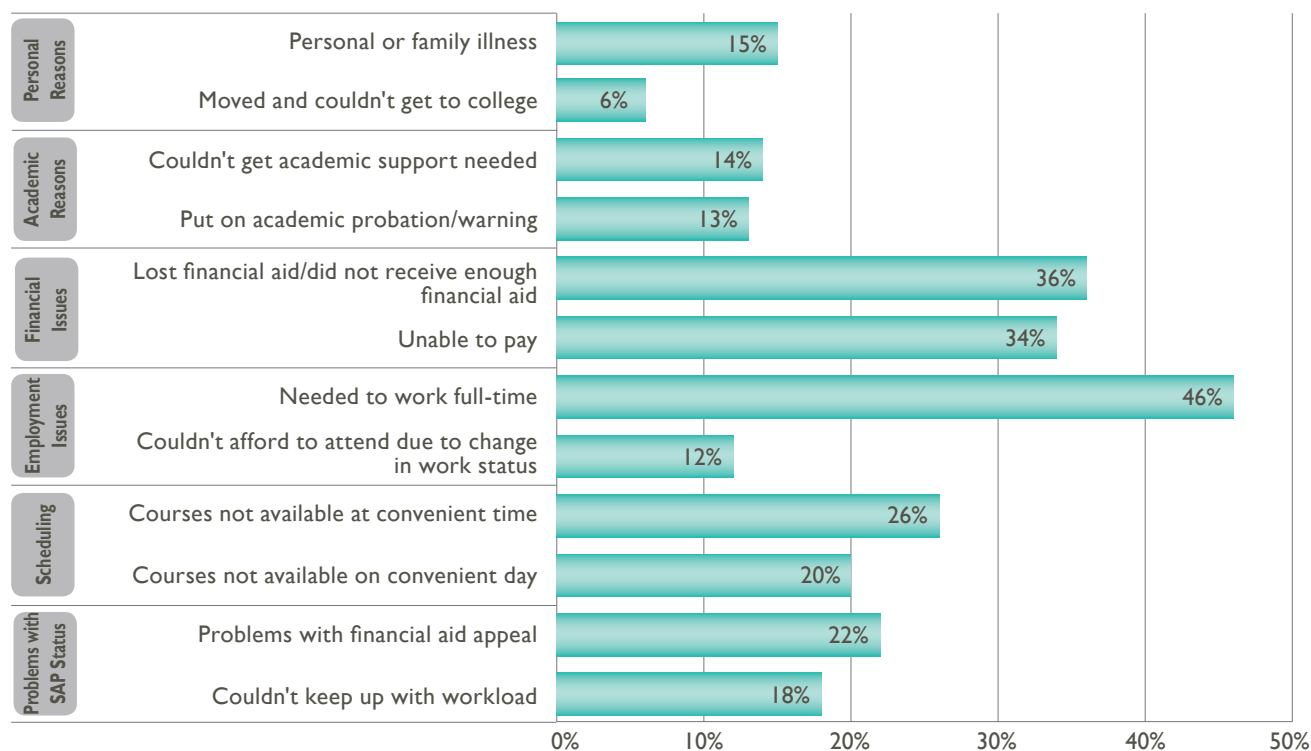
fall primarily into two general categories: career advancement and personal satisfaction.

Career advancement is a particularly strong motivator for many adults with some college credit when contemplating completing a degree. On an Eduventures survey of adults age 25 to 55 who had some college credit but no degree, 60% of respondents cited earning more money as a motivation while a third indicated a desire to advance in their profession (33%) or change careers (32%) (Eduventures 2014). On a survey of adults seeking credit for prior learning through LearningCounts.org, 45% indicated that getting a better job was a motivation while 40% said they would like to earn more money (Zalek 2013). On the survey of students who have re-enrolled in MnSCU, 59% saw increased earnings as a major motivation for returning to school (Wilder Research 2015). On the Grad TX survey of students enrolled

in bachelor's degree completion programs, 58% of respondents said they were concerned about being competitive in the job market, and 49% hoped to earn more money. Somewhat smaller percentages on that survey said that a bachelor's degree was necessary for them to get a new job (30%) or a promotion (23%) (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

It is also common to hear adults indicate that one reason they want to finish their degree is the personal satisfaction they will gain in completing something so challenging. Among adults seeking credit for prior learning through LearningCounts.org, two-thirds (65%) of respondents indicated that satisfaction in earning a degree was one of their motivations (Zalek 2013). On the MnSCU survey of returning adult students, 66% said that a major motivation for returning to school was the satisfaction in finishing something they had started—the highest response of all the options on

FIGURE 4: Reasons for Non-Completion Among Former Students, Ivy Tech Community College, 2013



Source: Ninon, Sonia. 2013. *Non-Returning Students Survey Results*. Indianapolis, IN: Ivy Tech Community College.



the survey (Wilder Research 2015). The Grad TX survey found even higher percentages of students reporting personal reasons for returning to school: 76% cited the desire to finish something they had started, 66% wanted to be better educated, and 54% felt that earning a degree would help them be better role models for their children (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

The motivations discussed above are similar to those identified by Higher Ed Insight during more than a dozen focus groups with students at Lumina-funded adult college completion project sites. Overall, the top motivations for returning to college mentioned by adult students were job-related, with students citing the need for a degree or certificate to find a job if unemployed, to feel secure in a current job, or to obtain a promotion or a better job in the future. A number of focus group participants also mentioned the need to retrain in a different field, either because economic changes had made their former career obsolete or because age and/or physical disability is limiting their job opportunities. Finally, quite a few focus group members spoke of the desire to be a role model for their children or personal pride in obtaining a college degree.

Life circumstances are undoubtedly also a factor in the decision to return to college. Unemployment, or the fear of it, was a topic that came up often in Higher Ed Insight's focus groups, together with a recognition that today's economy requires postsecondary credentials to succeed. Family situation matters, as well. In focus groups with adults considering enrolling in college in the next two years, for example, researchers heard from a number of people that they were motivated to consider attending college when their own high school age children began to make plans to go to college (Public Agenda 2013a). The Grad TX survey of students who had returned to college found that while 75% of these individuals have children, only 57% have children under 18 living

at home. This finding could suggest that reduced childcare obligations are a factor for some adults in the decision to return to college.

Overall, the top motivations for returning to college mentioned by adult students were job-related, with students citing the need for a degree or certificate to find a job if unemployed, to feel secure in a current job, or to obtain a promotion or a better job in the future.

Barriers to Returning to College

For adults with some college credit who are contemplating a return to college, several factors can be a barrier. As with the reasons why adults did not finish college in the first place, the cost of earning a degree and the challenge of balancing school with work and other responsibilities are among the factors most commonly mentioned.

These challenges can be seen in a variety of research studies on adult students. Market research, including surveys and phone interviews, conducted in Georgia as part of the state university system's degree-completion initiative, identified three primary areas that adults felt might stop them from completing a degree. These were limited time to spend on school, work and family responsibilities, and concerns about cost (Lane 2012; Paterson and Fowler 2013). Eduventures similarly notes that prospective adult students must be able to manage the increasing cost of higher education and find ways to balance school demands with those of work and family. However, Eduventures also notes that adult students who have been away from school



for some time also may not be prepared to handle college coursework (Eduventures 2014).

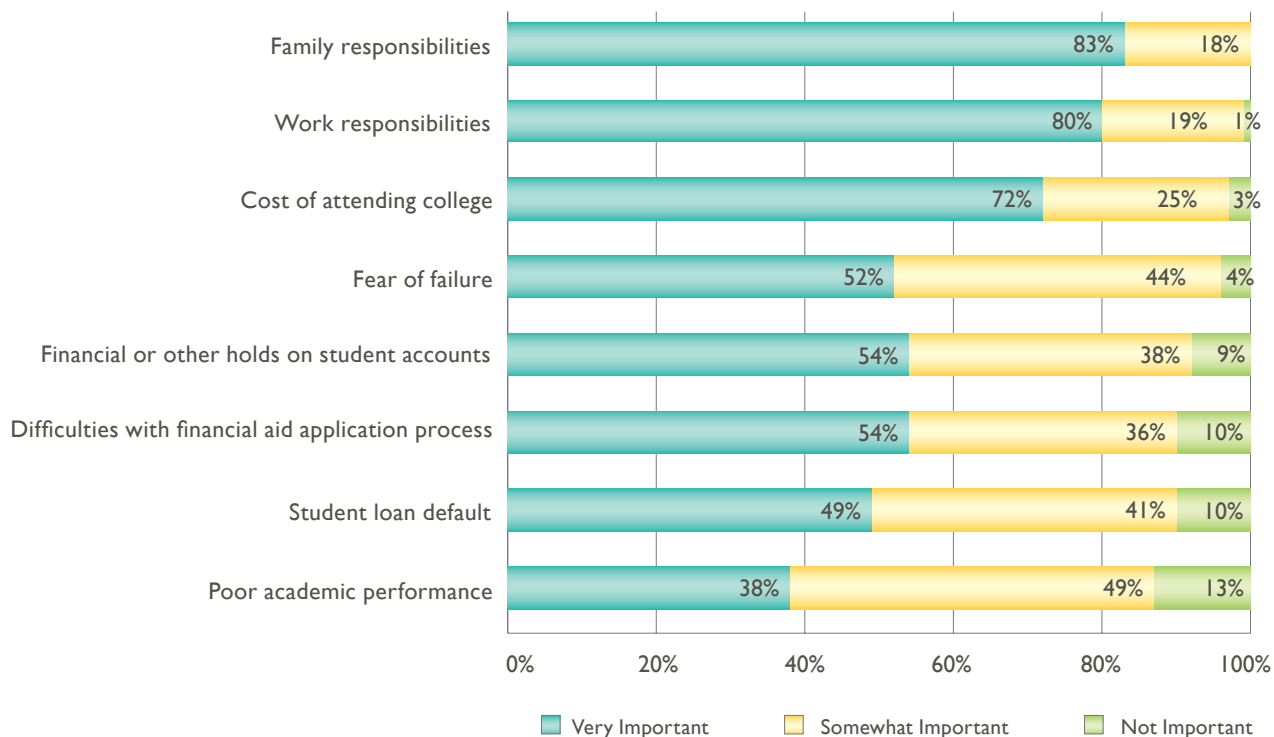
The relative importance of these barriers is suggested by the findings from a survey conducted by Higher Ed Insight with project coordinators who work directly with students at a range of Lumina-funded adult college completion project sites (see Figure 5). These grantees most often identified family responsibilities (83%), work responsibilities (80%), and the cost of attending college as crucial barriers to returning adults students (72%). Just over half of grantees identified, as very important barriers for returning adults, the fear of failure (52%) and bureaucratic challenges such as holds on student accounts (54%) and difficulties in completing financial aid applications (52%). Notably, poor academic performance was seen as

a very important barrier by only 38% of grantees. This finding demonstrates the importance of non-academic factors in supporting adults with some college credit as they return to college (Erisman and Steele 2012).

Special Student Populations

As the discussion above clearly shows, adults with some college credit are a very diverse group, which makes it challenging to develop outreach campaigns targeting these prospective students or to make changes in institutional policy and practice to better support these students when they do return to college. One particularly valuable approach to this population seems to be to identify discrete groups of adult students and then work to overcome this population's specific needs

FIGURE 5: Perceived Barriers to Return for Adult Non-Completers Among Adult College Completion Program Staff, 2012



Source: Erisman, Wendy, and Patricia Steele. 2012. *From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential*. Washington, DC: Higher Ed Insight.



(Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014). In recent years, a number of projects have been initiated that address the needs of particular segments of the returning adult student population—whether they be women with young children, unemployed workers, or adults age 50 and older. These projects, together with research on a range of specific adult student populations, offer guidance to colleges and universities that may wish to target one or more of these groups (*see Appendix B for a discussion of the educational needs of older adults*).

One group of adults with some college credit who have been targeted with some success are those who have earned enough credit for a degree but for some reason were not awarded that degree. Project Win-Win, coordinated by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, assisted 61 colleges in nine states with (1) identifying students who had earned sufficient credit to potentially be awarded an associate's degree, (2) determining if those students had completed a degree at another college, and (3) conducting degree audits to determine which of the remaining students were in fact eligible for a degree. Those students, when they could be located and would grant permission, could then be awarded their associate's degrees. Project Win-Win must be seen as a qualified success—out of nearly 42,000 former students who received a degree audit, 6,733 individuals (16%) were identified as having already earned an associate's degree and 4,550 (11%) could be located and awarded the degree (Adelman 2013). Nonetheless, this work has resulted in far more degree completions by adults with some college credit than has been achieved by any other project. In addition, Project Win-Win has demonstrated that there are significant numbers of adults with some college credit who could actually receive a degree without returning to school and that many postsecondary institutions are lacking in the data capacity to easily identify these students. These findings suggest that colleges and universities would do well to examine their

own student records to see if they have students that fit this pattern as well as making efforts to ensure that student academic progress is tracked more carefully, especially if students leave higher education without receiving a degree.

The passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Assistance Act of 2008, together with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, have drawn new attention to veteran and active military personnel as an important population of adult students. The importance of active military and veteran students to changing public awareness and institutional culture around adult students cannot be overstated. During Higher Ed Insight's evaluation of Lumina's adult college completion work, more than half of the 17 projects raised the issue of serving military and veteran students, even though none of the projects were dedicated to this population. The increasing presence of veteran students at postsecondary institutions is pushing them to make policy and practice changes that have the potential to benefit all adult students on their campuses. Similarly, as state legislatures open the door to credit for prior learning, by requiring or encouraging state colleges and universities to offer credit for military training, it seems likely that this door can be pushed open further as understanding and acceptance of prior learning assessment increases (*see Appendix B for a more in-depth discussion of the educational needs of veterans and active military personnel*).

Marketing and Outreach to Prospective Adult Students

Demographic changes in the United States mean that, despite increasing rates of high school graduation and college enrollment, the number of traditional-age postsecondary students is projected to decline over the next decade. In states where this demographic trend is especially apparent, colleges and universities will face pressure to turn to adult students to maintain enrollment levels (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2012).

As institutions turn to recruiting adult students, those with prior college credit are an obvious target. A 2014 study found that, as a result of declining enrollments of first-time students as well as state workforce and college completion initiatives, fully half of open-admissions postsecondary institutions are trying to enroll more non-first-time students. Reaching these students, however, is a challenge. Unlike traditional age students, who can more easily be reached through their high schools or mailing lists obtained from the organizations that administer college entrance exams, adults with some college but no degree are an elusive group who must be reached through varying strategies (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014). As a result, many institutions have resorted to seeking transfer students to bolster their enrollments rather than seeking out adults who are not currently enrolled in college (Parkay and Kilgore 2014).

Research suggests that traditional college recruitment strategies may not work well with prospective adult students. A survey of adults planning to enroll in college in the next two years, 55% of whom already have some college credit, found that the most common source of information about enrolling in college was through family, friends, or colleagues (Public Agenda 2013a). Similarly, a study of individuals who made inquiries about attending a particular college or university found that 19% of those inquiries were made as a result of a referral from another person (Deckmeier and Tilghman 2010). Generating word-of-mouth publicity is a far cry from the approaches postsecondary institutions typically use to reach prospective students. Therefore, developing effective strategies to reach adult students has been a major focus of adult college completion efforts (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

Direct Outreach to Former Students

Building on the work of the Non-Traditional No More project (Lane, Michelau, and Palmer 2012), several of the adult college completion

projects funded by Lumina in 2010 were efforts by state postsecondary systems to contact students who had stopped out from their institutions and to encourage them to return to complete a degree or certificate. One distinct advantage of this type of direct outreach is the ability to tailor messages to individual students. Both Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU), for example, created individualized letters or emails that indicated the number of credits a student had already earned. These two projects yielded solid outcomes in terms of adult student enrollment and completions but also experienced many of the same challenges identified in earlier direct outreach efforts (*see Figure 6*).

As of Fall 2014, three years after conducting an initial outreach campaign, Ivy Tech had contacted nearly 55,000 former students, of whom 9,187 (17%) re-enrolled for at least one semester and 1,960 (4%) completed a degree or certificate. MnSCU's outcomes as of 2014 were somewhat lower. Out of around 40,000 former students who were contacted, 2,865 (7%) had re-enrolled at an MnSCU institution and 309 (1%) had completed a postsecondary credential. While these numbers may seem quite low, several participants in the Non-Traditional No More project had response rates to their direct outreach campaigns below 10% (Lane 2012), and an adult college completion effort in New Jersey found that only 2% of students contacted during the fall semester were enrolled the following spring (Bausch et al 2011). These results provide a consistent pattern of evidence suggesting that direct outreach campaigns are not likely to yield responses much higher than those achieved by Ivy Tech and MnSCU. As a result, postsecondary systems and institutions must consider whether or not they can achieve an adequate return on investment when considering this type of approach.

The challenges experienced by Ivy Tech and MnSCU were quite consistent with those noted



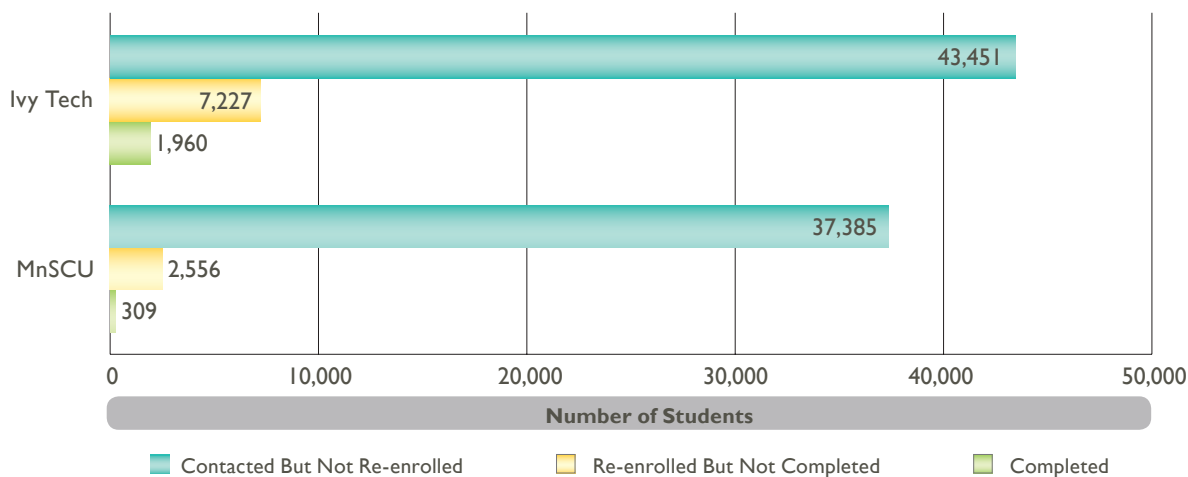
by participants in the Non-Traditional No More project. Conducting this type of outreach effort requires extensive data mining to identify students who seem to be good candidates for degree completion based on criteria such as the number of credits earned, the length of time since they last enrolled, and their academic standing. Early efforts with direct outreach showed that many students who appear to be stop-outs have, in fact, transferred to another institution, possibly in another state. As a result, data-matching with a source such as the National Student Clearinghouse is an essential step in identifying the target audience for outreach efforts. Finally, for all of these projects, a particular challenge was to find current contact information for former students. During MnSCU's first direct mail campaign, for example, 10% to 15% of the mail pieces proved to be undeliverable. To address this problem, some Non-Traditional No More participants had success with purchasing contact information from data aggregation firms (Lane, Michelau, and Palmer 2012). Similarly, several states, including West Virginia and Texas, have been able to obtain updated contact information through the State Department of Motor Vehicles

(Erisman and Steele 2012; Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

A 2014 survey of students contacted during Ivy Tech's outreach effort found that students very much preferred to be contacted by email, with 73% identifying email as their preferred method of communication versus 15% who preferred letters, 7% postcards, and 5% phone calls. MnSCU reached much the same conclusion in their outreach work (Ivy Tech 2014). After conducting two large mailings and determining that the digital approach was more effective (and more cost-effective), MnSCU switched from postal mail to email and other forms of digital marketing. These findings are promising for future direct outreach campaigns, because email costs are much lower than postal mail costs, provided the system or institution has access to up-to-date email addresses of former students.

Near-Completers. A thread that moves through discussions about direct outreach to former students focuses on “near-completers,” students who have completed a substantial amount of credit towards a degree. Definitions of this group vary,

FIGURE 6: Returning Adult Student Outreach, Enrollment, and Completion, Ivy Tech Community College and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU), 2011-14



Source: Data provided by Ivy Tech Community College and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities.

but generally they are assumed to have completed at least 75% of the credits needed for a degree and to have been in good academic standing when they left the postsecondary institution. This group has been described as “low-hanging fruit,” (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2011), and in a 2014 survey conducted by Higher Ed Insight, 82% of adult college completion stakeholders said they considered outreach to near-completers to be a very important strategy to increase college completion (Erisman and Steele 2014a).

However, the work of the Non-Traditional No More project, as well as more recent Lumina-funded direct student outreach efforts, leads to the conclusion that near-completers should not be considered “low-hanging fruit” (McKay and Lane 2013). Many factors affect the potential for convincing these students to return to college. Ivy Tech, for example, found that it was easier to re-enroll students with fewer credits and shorter stop-outs than those who were closer to a degree but had been away from school for some time. After focusing in the first year of their project on students with at least 45 credits who had stopped out at least a year earlier, Ivy Tech staff changed their focus to students with at least 15 credits who were not enrolled during the current semester and found that this second group responded at rates much higher than the first group (17% versus 9%) (Erisman and Steele 2012).

Project Win-Win helps shine a light on why near-completers may actually be a quite difficult group to reach. While the primary focus of Project Win-Win was on awarding associate’s degrees to students who had completed the necessary work but had never received the degree, participating postsecondary institutions also flagged “potentials,” students who had nearly all of the credits needed to earn a specific degree. However, these potential completers proved difficult to locate, and more than a quarter (26%) were missing one or more math courses. Others, particularly at institutions

with many English Language Learners, were missing English requirements. In addition, some students had relatively low grades (especially in their majors), owed money to the institution, or were further away from completion than expected because some of their credits were considered too old or the student had not completed the institution’s residency requirement (Adelman 2013). All of these factors, while not insurmountable, reduce the likelihood that a student will return to college and successfully complete a degree.

Despite the challenges of reaching near-completers, postsecondary systems and institutions are likely to continue to target this population because they are (1) identifiable and (2) closer to earning a degree than other adult student populations. What will be important for systems and schools to consider, as with any direct student outreach effort, is whether the benefits of such an approach outweigh the costs. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2011) has suggested that performance funding might be a way to encourage institutions to reach out to near-completers without too much financial risk and that targeting students who are near to completing degrees with high labor market value might also be productive. Independent of the approach used, it will be essential for effective outreach efforts to recognize the obstacles that confront even a former student who may be within just a few credits of a degree.

Media Outreach

One significant limitation of outreach to former students is that it misses prospective students who have moved to a different area or would prefer to complete a degree at a different postsecondary institution. To reach these students, individual institutions and state higher education systems have found it necessary to undertake broader mass marketing campaigns (Lane, Michelau, and Palmer 2012). Media outreach is undoubtedly important to prospective adult students. In a survey conducted by



Higher Ed Insight, more than half (52%) of adult college completion stakeholders consider media campaigns to be very important to increasing adult college completion, and that percentage rose to 63% among the state and institutional stakeholders who are the ones most likely to undertake such campaigns (Erisman and Steele 2014a). In addition, a survey of adults planning to enroll in college in the next two years found that 64% used television commercials, billboards, or other advertising as a source of information about college, second only to word of mouth (Public Agenda 2013a). Such advertising has been used effectively by for-profit postsecondary institutions that also target adult students, suggesting that it is important for other colleges and universities to consider this approach in order to compete strategically for this student population.

Several of the projects funded by Lumina in 2010—in particular, MnSCU’s Graduate Minnesota project and the DegreeNow initiative run by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC)—used media outreach as part of their strategy for encouraging adults with some college credit to return to school. Among the strategies used by these projects was traditional media advertising, including television, radio, and newspaper ads. Site-based advertising, including billboards, pre-show advertising at movie theaters, and signs at locations such as bus stops, grocery stores, and gas stations, was another approach used. These projects, as well as others, also benefited from coverage of their work in newspapers and on radio and television. A number of statewide media outreach projects, including West Virginia (Stephens 2013; Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014), Georgia, Oklahoma, and Kentucky, developed branded materials that could be customized by individual colleges and universities, and in some cases, provided marketing grants to these institutions, recognizing that adults tend to be place-bound and are most likely to

enroll in a local college or university (Erisman and Steele 2013).

Several of the Lumina-funded projects found digital media outreach to be a particularly valuable approach. WVHEPC found that inexpensive advertising on the internet radio station Pandora produced good results and also relied on Facebook, Twitter, and Vimeo as low-cost mechanisms for directing potential students to a web portal (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014). MnSCU found digital media to be so effective that they moved all of their media outreach to that format in the third year of their project. Project staff determined, for example, that a Facebook advertising campaign reached nearly 500,000 people (about 23% of their overall target audience) at a cost of \$2,400 or \$1.50 per click-through (Stephens 2013). Both WVHEPC and MnSCU also found that their social media campaigns produced click-through rates above industry benchmarks.

Identifying effective messages for media outreach is a crucial part of the process. The University System of Georgia conducted online and telephone surveys with adults with some college credit prior to beginning a statewide media campaign. The system then used the information from these surveys to develop advertising messages that were tested in focus groups. Through this process, project leaders found that adults responded best to advertising that showed people with whom they could identify, emphasized the value of higher education, and suggested that there are ways to overcome obstacles to returning to college (Paterson and Fowler 2013). Focus group research for the Grad TX website determined that adults respond well to “words like older, mature, experienced, adult and full-time working...(mother, parent, adult)” (Rapaport and Rolf 2013). Survey research done for the Center for Adult Learning Louisiana found that adults with some college credit were interested in online and accelerated courses and so oriented their advertising campaign around the

idea that adults can complete their degrees quickly and online (Dowden 2007).

When tailored to a specific college or university, media messaging can also address pressing student concerns about choosing the right institution. Research with prospective adult students has found some relatively consistent patterns in terms of what students care most about in choosing a college or university. The availability of the desired program of study, the location of the institution, and convenient and/or flexible course scheduling seem to be among the most important factors. In various studies, prospective students also mentioned valuing affordability, caring and knowledgeable instructors, and the opportunity to learn skills that will help them in the workforce (Eduventures 2008; Dreckmeier and Tilghman 2010; Noel-Levitz and Council for Adult and Experiential Education 2013; Public Agenda 2013a).

Targeted Websites

In a Higher Ed Insight survey of adult college completion stakeholders, more than half (51%) said web portals where adults with some college credit can learn about degree or certificate programs are very important to increasing adult college completion. This percentage increased to 69% among state and institutional stakeholders, whose direct work with adult students may give them additional insight into how best to reach these students (Erisman and Steele 2014a). From the student's perspective, having access to a website that allows comparisons across institutions is far more convenient than having to navigate through multiple college websites and may help such students make more informed decisions about which institution to attend.

States often find web portals valuable as part of statewide initiatives focused on adult college completion. Direct outreach materials or mass media outreach can direct prospective students to a web portal as a centralized source of information

about degree-completion programs available in the state. Most web portals include more general information about the value of a college degree, the college application process, transfer of credit, credit for prior learning, college costs and financial aid, online education, and/or strategies for balancing school with other responsibilities. Some sites offer success stories from adult degree completers to serve as an inspiration for others. For all such websites, ease of use is important. WVHEPC's DegreeNow program, for example, determined that three key factors in adult degree completion website effectiveness are easy navigability, clear steps on how to re-enroll, and contact information for the designated adult student contact at specific institutions (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

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Grad TX is a good example of a state web portal tailored to adults with some college credit. Usability studies for the Grad TX website found that 80% of users said they were more likely to continue taking steps toward completing a bachelor's degree after visiting the website. The Grad TX website features that were found most valuable by users included information about degree completion programs and the colleges offering them (54%), a credit transfer tool that provides an unofficial transcript evaluation showing how the student's credits might transfer at different schools (42%), and contact information for degree-completion program



advisors at specific institutions (40%) (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

One of the projects funded by Lumina in 2010 was TheAdultLearner.org, a website developed by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) to serve as a go-to resource for online degree completion options nationwide as well as offering resources about financial aid and other key issues of concern to adult learners. In order to participate, degree-completion programs have to be offered online or in hybrid formats. Degree-completion programs also have to provide accelerated programming to shorten time to degree, and offer credit for prior learning. The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) recently entered into a partnership with TheAdultLearner.org to extend the site's content beyond SREB states. Through their arrangement, all SARA member institutions within SARA states will have the opportunity to be featured on TheAdultLearner.org as adult-friendly degree programs. SREB and OLC are now working in close collaboration with SARA staff to establish the website as a valuable resource for returning adult students across the country. The TheAdultLearner.org website is now live, and a marketing plan is in place to begin to promote the site once the final pieces have come together.

Eduventures' [Smart Degree](http://SmartDegree.org) website takes a different approach to assisting adults with some college credit in identifying appropriate bachelor's degree completion programs. Prospective students who sign up for the free service are provided with a mentor to give them one-on-one assistance by phone or email. The site offers academic and career assessments and access to low-cost general education courses through Bellevue University. The most innovative aspect of the website is the Student Marketplace, in which students create anonymous profiles and Smart Degree partner colleges make admissions offers based on those

profiles (Eduventures 2014). The Smart Degree approach is an intriguing one since it offers the one-on-one advising support many returning adult students need. The approach also includes the opportunity for students to assess their academic readiness and career goals prior to re-enrolling in college. At this time, however, concerns that the mentors may in fact function primarily as salespeople (Fain 2014), the choice of assessments available, the lack of information about associate's degree or certificate programs, and most importantly, the limited number of partner postsecondary institutions make the value of the website undetermined.

The results from a survey and from focus groups with adults who are planning to enroll in college in the next two years, more than half of whom already have some college credit, raise an important point about the effectiveness of state or national adult college completion web portals. While 55% of the survey respondents had used a specific institution's website as a source of college information, only 18% had used an interactive website that allowed them to compare different colleges. Among those who had used such websites, on the other hand, 73% indicated that their experience with the website was very good or excellent. Focus group participants, when shown some of the interactive websites available, found them to be valuable resources, particularly when they were able to use search tools to identify institutions that met their needs. The problem, from the perspective of these focus group members, is that the interactive websites were typically not among the top sites listed when they used search engines to look for adult-focused postsecondary programs. Instead, the websites that they saw most often were those of for-profit institutions (Public Agenda 2013a).

This finding indicates that, if non-profit state and national adult learner websites are to succeed, they must work to increase the chances that a website will appear high in the search results.

Attention to promoting non-profit adult college completion websites is of particular importance given that these websites must also compete with for-profit lead-generation websites, on which for-profit colleges pay to have their institutions featured (Fain 2014; Wong 2015).

Institutional Services for Adult Students

There is a clear consensus among experts that adult students have needs different from those of traditional-age students and that promoting college access and success for adults will require many postsecondary institutions to change both the services they offer to students and how those services are implemented. This recognition of adult student needs is not a new idea. In 2000, for example, the Council for Adult and Experiential Education (CAEL) noted that adults now make up a significant proportion of undergraduate students and identified a set of eight principles of effectiveness that distinguish what CAEL calls “Adult Learning Focused Institutions” (ALFI). The areas covered by these principles, including outreach, strategic partnerships, and student support services, appear throughout the literature on adult students as well as in this report (CAEL 2000).

However, expert consensus on the needs of adult students has not meant that all, or even most, postsecondary institutions have adopted these principles, even among institutions that commonly serve adult students. Postsecondary institutions are even less likely to have explicitly considered the needs of returning adult students. In a 2014 survey of open-access institutions, for instance, only one-third of responding institutions indicated that they have programs tailored to non-first-time students, and less than 15% indicated that they have policies and procedures designed to assist such students (Parkay and Kilgore 2014).

The frequent absence of institutional policies and practices designed to support adult students is particularly problematic given that a 2014 Higher

Ed Insight survey of campus-level practitioners working on adult college completion projects found a strong correlation between stakeholder perceptions of a postsecondary institution as adult-friendly and observed improvements in student outcomes. Seventy-one percent of survey respondents who agreed that their institutions have a commitment to adult students also reported seeing at least some increases in adult student retention, and 79% reported seeing at least some increases in adult student completion. However, those percentages were 33% and 29% for respondents who did not agree that their institutions are committed to serving adult students. In addition, respondents who agreed that their institutions have policies that may hinder adult student completion were much less likely than others to report increases in adult degree completion (53% versus 80%) (Erisman and Steele 2014b).

There is a clear consensus among experts that adult students have needs different from those of traditional-age students and that promoting college access and success for adults will require many postsecondary institutions to change both the services they offer to students and how those services are implemented.

Creating awareness among institutional leaders about the needs of adult students, particularly those who have already earned some college credit, is a crucial first step in changing institutional culture and practice around this student population. WVHEPC, for example, found that their statewide adult degree completion initiative began to gain traction after staff held a workshop

designed to help college and university presidents in the state understand the needs of adult learners and their importance to state degree completion goals. However, WVHEPC staff also note that building buy-in among leaders on college campuses is insufficient if staff members do not have the knowledge and skills they need to effect change on their campuses. Providing training, and to the extent possible, resources to campus staff members who will be working directly with returning adult students is key to the success of any institutional effort to improve adult student success (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

Admissions Procedures

Research indicates that postsecondary admissions procedures are a major bottleneck for adults with some college credit when they try to return to college. Many prospective adult students who used the Grad TX college-completion website noted on a survey that they had reached out to an adult student counselor at a specific institution, but that person either did not respond or was very slow to respond to calls or emails (Rapaport and Rolf 2013). Moreover, when InsideTrack used “secret shoppers” to request information from 221 adult-focused degree programs, they found that for-profit and online schools were rated quite a bit higher than private non-profit and public institutions in terms of responsiveness. Public institutions, in fact, averaged only 5.1 on a 10-point scale for responsiveness versus an average score of 7.5 for for-profit institutions. This pattern held true across a range of results from this project (see Figure 7).

For-profit institutions consistently outperformed their public and non-profit peers, even though no institutional sector did a particularly good job of providing prospective students with information about the financial and time commitments required for the program (InsideTrack 2012a).

In a publication outlining the lessons learned from WVHEPC’s DegreeNow project, the authors argue that “the most important contact a prospective student makes is the initial contact with an institution. This is essential in establishing a positive relationship and in generating positive public opinion” (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014). As noted above, responsiveness and adequacy of the information provided are two key factors that can make or break this first contact. The WVHEPC authors go on to point out that prospective adult students ask relatively consistent questions on topics such as choice of program, cost and financial aid, time to completion, and transfer of credit. This conclusion indicates that colleges and universities must train their front-line staff to respond to such questions quickly and accurately (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

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Higher education systems conducting outreach campaigns targeted to adults with some college credit have adopted a number of strategies to ensure that prospective students can easily make that first contact. MnSCU utilizes an existing call center designed to provide academic advising to online students and has designed their outreach materials to direct students to contact the center by phone, email, or instant message. Students who contact the call center are connected with an advisor who

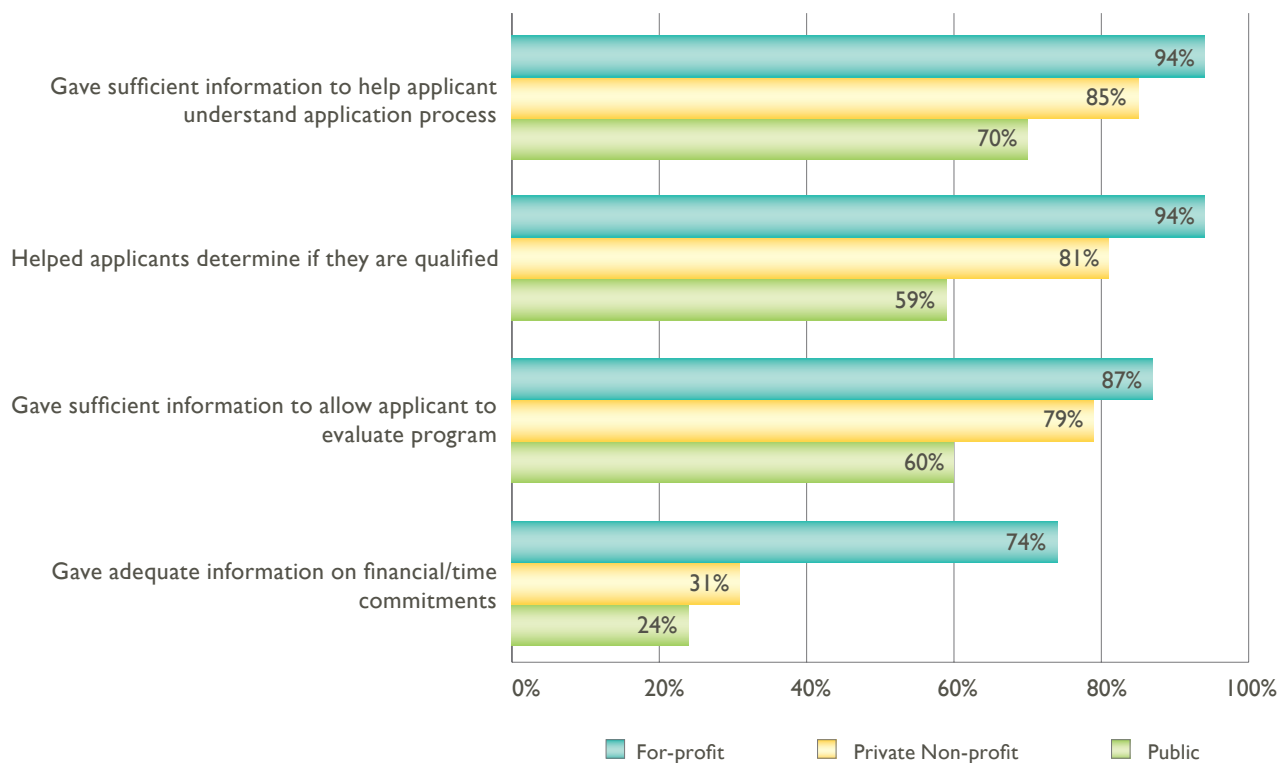


has been trained in the needs of adult students. However, project staff did learn that they also have to encourage participating institutions to train their front-line staff on the details of the Graduate Minnesota program because some students contact the campus directly rather than going through the call center. Ivy Tech, on the other hand, took a slightly different approach. Their call center fields calls from current and prospective students from 7am to 1am, 7 days a week, but also does outbound calls to former students who have received a direct mail piece from the college. If the student expresses interest in returning to school, the call center staff contact the appropriate Regional Adult Degree Completion Adviser who then reaches out to the prospective student within 48 hours.

One solution to the admissions bottleneck is for postsecondary institutions to designate a single

point of contact for all returning adult students, a practice considered very important to the success of such students by 57% of adult college completion project coordinators based in postsecondary institutions (Higher Ed Insight 2014a). The NonTraditional No More project called this role a “concierge,” and defined it as “an individual (or an office at the larger institutions) trained to help ready adults navigate the application, enrollment, and registration process in the same way that a hotel concierge assists its guests in finding activities or restaurants that suit their needs or interests.” (Michelau and Lane 2010). Project staff note that concierges must be accessible to prospective students even outside of normal business hours and must have strong ties to other key campus offices. These ties help ensure that students are connected to the right person in an office and that staff in other

FIGURE 7: Institutional Responses to Prospective Adult Students by Sector, 2010-11



Source: Inside Track. 2012. *A Look at How Colleges and Universities Respond to Inquiries from Prospective Adult Students*. Portland, OR.

offices will know to direct an adult student to the concierge for assistance. They also recommend that colleges and universities empower the concierge to make decisions that can help overcome barriers faced by returning students and offer input so that problematic policies can be changed at the institutional level (Michelau and Lane 2010).

Credit Transfer

A challenge faced by adults with some college credit as they attempt to return to school is the issue of credit transfer. By definition, these prospective students have already earned some college credit, which may or may not have come from the postsecondary institution in which they are now trying to enroll. In fact, adult students are likely to have credit from multiple colleges and universities. A study of adult learners found that 72% of those working on bachelor's degrees had transferred credit from another institution (University Professional and Continuing Education Association and Hobsons 2014). For these students, the enrollment process is more complex than for a first-time student. They must first obtain transcripts from all the postsecondary institutions at which they have earned credit, and they must then make an informed decision about which school or program will be the best choice for them given their existing credits (Michelau and Lane 2010).

The process of credit transfer is of particular importance to returning adult students because it affects how long it will likely take them to complete a credential. Students in Texas who had enrolled in a bachelor's degree completion program for example, reported that getting meaningful help with credit transfer could be difficult and that ease of transferring credit was a key factor that made it possible for them to return to school (Rapaport and Rolf 2013). The experience of professionals who work with adult students confirms this finding. More than two-thirds (69%) of adult college completion project coordinators based at

postsecondary institutions identified policies that facilitate the transfer of credit as a very important service for adult students (Higher Ed Insight 2014a).

However, when seeking to return to college, many students find that they cannot get their credits evaluated until after they have enrolled. At that point, if the institution in which they are enrolling will not accept their existing credits and/or will not apply those credits to a specific degree program, the students are faced with the choice of pursuing a program that may take longer to complete or dropping out to start the process again at a different institution (Michelau and Lane 2010). Focus group participants from Lumina-funded adult college completion projects noted, in particular, that they would like to see postsecondary institutions accept more transfer credit and provide more transparent processes to help students understand the extent to which their credits will transfer prior to enrollment.

One solution to this challenge is online degree audit tools that can help students make more informed decisions about where to enroll (Parkay and Kilgore 2014). These tools are of most value when they allow students to compare how their credits will transfer across a range of programs. The Grad TX website, for example, includes a tool that allows students to enter their existing credits to see how it would transfer to any of the participating state universities (Lane 2012). Similarly, Georgia is in the process of developing a transfer and articulation web portal that will enable students to look at the transferability of credits among the state colleges and universities as well as from other accredited institutions in the state (Erisman and Steele 2013).

Lessons learned from the Texas effort suggest that practical and technological challenges still exist. In particular, Grad TX staff found that participating universities could not always provide adequate information on transfer equivalencies

and that the use of different student information systems by different institutions made it impossible for students to simply import a transcript into the credit transfer tool rather than entering all courses by hand. In addition, while 44% of Grad TX website users who responded to a survey had tried using the credit transfer tool, 27% of those respondents found it difficult to use, suggesting a need for further refinement of the tool (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

Advising

As the discussion of credit transfer above suggests, advising is a key support service for returning adult students. Both before enrollment and while completing a degree or certificate, adults need easily accessible and clear guidance about course selection, how they are progressing academically, and where to go for help if they need tutoring or other academic assistance. Among adult college completion project coordinators at postsecondary institutions, 62% identified advising as a very important support service for adult students (Higher Ed Insight 2014a). Furthermore, during focus groups with adults with some college credit conducted during the Grad TX evaluation, participants noted the importance of advising as both necessary for them to complete a degree but also, in its absence, as a reason why they did not complete their original degree program (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

Advising is an area where institutions that serve adult students are beginning to expand their services. In 2013, according to a survey of such institutions, many had increased the advising services offered during the year since a similar survey was conducted. In particular, 93% reported offering specialized advising for non-traditional students (versus 68% in 2012), 67% had increased the number of advisors available (versus 53% in 2012), and 74% were using an early alert system to notify advisors and/or faculty when students

were struggling academically (versus 69% in 2012). (University Professional and Continuing Education Association and InsideTrack 2014).

In order to be effective in working with returning adult students, advisors must be knowledgeable in a variety of areas, including degree program, licensing and certification requirements, course availability and formats, and services available to help students overcome challenges such as work or family obligations (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014). Advisors must also be able to assist adults with career and life skills planning, an area in which currently enrolled adult students are more likely to be unsatisfied with their college or university (Noel-Levitz and CAEL 2013). The assistance traditionally offered by career services offices at postsecondary institutions may be insufficient for adult students who have already been part of the workforce. For instance, colleges in West Virginia found that adult students may already know how to put together a resume but could benefit from workshops on topics such as using online websites and social networking sites for job searching (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

Support Services

Like all students, returning adult students may need to consult the financial aid office, pay a bill at the bursar's office, talk to an advisor, find a tutor, or access any one of the many students support services that can be found on any college campus. However, for adult students who work full-time or have childcare responsibilities, visiting these offices during regular working hours may be a challenge. During focus groups conducted with Lumina adult college completion grantees, the subject of accessible support services came up repeatedly. Similarly, 55% of adult college completion project coordinators at postsecondary institutions consider accessible students services to be very important for adult students (Higher Ed Insight 2014a). Many of the focus group participants proposed ways to



alleviate this issue. These included opening student support services offices on a weekday evening or a weekend day, locating these offices in the same or nearby buildings to make it easy for a student to accomplish several errands in one trip to campus, and/or providing as much information as possible online, even to the extent of offering instant messaging with a service representative so that students can get questions answered as easily as possible.

WVHEPC, through its DegreeNow program, undertook to help state colleges and universities make their student support services more adult-friendly. Building on a “train-the-trainer” workshop conducted by senior leaders from NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and attended by nearly 40 student affairs professionals, these individuals offered regional and campus-based workshops as well as workshops at statewide conferences, providing training to over 250 student affairs professionals by 2014. WVHEPC’s DegreeNow staff conducted a follow-up survey with workshop participants and found that many had returned to their campuses and begun to adopt new programs and services for adult students. Practice changes reported on this survey included instituting a peer mentoring program for adult students and offering extended hours for key student services offices. The work of DegreeNow led to the publication of two tutorials designed to help student affairs professionals expand their work. These guides—one on building a culture of evidence and the other on offering services for adult learners—are available to West Virginia higher education professionals for free but are also available for sale through NASPA (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

Both in West Virginia and in other adult college completion projects, two key approaches to supporting returning adult students stood out. The first of these is creating adult-focused orientation

sessions, student success class sections, and/or short workshops on key topics. Each of these options offers adult students an opportunity to interact with peers as well as to learn about topics of particular concern to them, including brushing up skills in writing or math, learning technology skills, conquering test anxiety, career planning, and balancing school with other responsibilities (Paterson and Fowler 2013; Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014; Learning for Action 2015). One state college in Georgia, for example, found that adopting an adult-focused curriculum for a student success course improved retention rates for adult students when compared to those enrolled in traditional sections of the course (Paterson and Fowler 2013). In the same vein, colleges participating in the American Association of Community College (AACC) Plus 50 program, which serves older adults, have found that these students may have little experience using computers and can benefit from opportunities to learn how to use computer technology in an unthreatening environment (Learning for Action 2015).

Another approach to supporting adult students is to create an office and/or student center specifically designed with adults in mind. At Jefferson Community and Technical College, in Louisville, KY, for example, returning adult students are eligible to use the college’s new Adult Student Center. The center houses an advising office and offers adult students services such as information on academic programs of interest to career seekers, assistance in navigating college procedures, information about financial aid resources, career and job search assistance, and computer skills training (Erisman 2014a). Similarly, West Virginia State University has established an Office of Adult and Commuter Student Services. In addition to offering access to advising and referrals, this center also provides students with a place to study or relax between classes and a computer lab (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

A final approach to supporting adult students that has received considerable attention in the past few years is offering students information about public benefits. Recognizing that many adult college students are eligible for a range of public benefits, including food stamps, subsidized child care, Medicaid or Affordable Care Act subsidies, and others, several programs have begun to experiment with helping community colleges, in particular, connect their students to the benefits for which they are eligible and which may allow them to complete college. Single Stop USA, a national non-profit focusing on increasing access to public benefits, helps community colleges establish one-stop sites on their campuses. At these sites, students are screened for benefits eligibility and provided with referrals to the relevant agencies as well as receiving financial and legal counseling as needed (Goldrick-Rabb, Broton, and Frank 2014). A similar project, Benefits Access for College Completion, has used demonstration projects at seven community colleges to explore effective models for connecting students with needed benefits. Among the lessons identified in a recent evaluation of this project was the need for a centralized hub where students could easily obtain help in gaining access to public benefits. Another lesson learned was the value of adopting an opt-out approach where targeted students are screened for public benefits eligibility during registration or financial aid counseling unless they choose not to receive this service (Price et al 2014).

Financial Aid

As noted earlier in this report, difficulties with paying for college are both a reason why adult students stop out and a barrier that prevents them from returning. While many returning adult students work, their jobs may not pay enough to cover both living expenses and college tuition, especially if the prospective student is supporting a family. Some working adults are able to obtain tuition assistance from their employers, but many

are not eligible. Federal data on how students pay for college show that, as of 2011-12, about 6% of undergraduate students age 25 and older received employer aid, and among those who did receive such aid, the median award was about \$1,800 (National Center for Education Statistics 2015). In addition, the most common structure for employer aid—reimbursement for already accrued expenses—makes it difficult for some eligible students to take advantage of this benefit.

During focus groups conducted by Higher Ed Insight as part of its evaluation of Lumina adult college completion efforts, both students and project staff noted how difficult it can be for adults to obtain sufficient financial aid. Among the financial aid challenges faced by many adult students are ineligibility for some federal financial aid due to less than half-time enrollment or enrollment in non-credit courses and loss of aid because of the limit on the number of semesters during which a student can receive aid (Kazis et al 2007). Among adult college completion stakeholders surveyed by Higher Ed Insight in 2014, 62% said that policies that allow students enrolled less than half-time to receive financial aid are very important to increasing degree completion by adult students while 58% said that policies that extend the number of semesters a student can receive financial aid are very important (Erisman and Steele 2014a).

Obtaining financial aid from their state of residence can be even more challenging for returning adult students. Most state need-based financial aid programs are targeted towards traditional-age students and/or those who attend college full-time. A recent news article reported that only 28 states have financial aid programs that place no restrictions on adult students. On the other hand, five states do not offer any aid to students who graduated from high school 10 or more years ago while another 11 states offer only very limited aid to such students (Kolodner 2015).

Adult college completion stakeholders surveyed by Higher Ed Insight also noted this problem, with 76% indicating that state financial aid programs targeted at part-time and/or nontraditional students are very important to increasing adult college completion, the second largest percentage for any of the state and federal policies addressed on the survey (Erisman and Steele 2014a).

One way to address the financial aid challenges faced by returning adult students is for states and postsecondary institutions to offer scholarship programs targeted to this student population. West Virginia, for example, has developed a Higher Education Adult Part-time Student Program, which provides need-based grants to eligible students for up to 10 years with a maximum grant award that covers tuition and mandatory fees (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014). In addition to ensuring that returning adult students have access to as many financial aid opportunities as possible, postsecondary systems and institutions have also experimented with creative scholarship programs aimed at nontraditional students. Ivy Tech offers a “last class” scholarship, which covers the cost of up to three credits as an incentive to encourage students to complete an almost finished degree or certificate. Maysville Community and Technical College in Kentucky offers a “jump start” scholarship that pays for the first six credits taken by employees of selected companies in their services area. Because these companies offer tuition reimbursement, the student can use the company’s reimbursement for these six credits to pay up-front for the next semester.

A potential source of funding for some returning adult students is the workforce system, especially the training funds administered by local Workforce Investment Boards and distributed through workforce one-stop centers. Rutgers’ School of Labor and Management Relations, in partnership with the National Association of Workforce Boards, undertook a project designed

to promote the use of workforce training funds to facilitate degree completion for adults with some college credit. The results of this project suggest that partnerships between workforce agencies and colleges have the potential to assist adults with some college credit. However, building these partnerships takes time and there will be challenges to overcome. One of the challenges identified by project staff are varying attitudes toward degree completion among workforce staff, with some questioning the employment potential for degrees versus short-term training. Another challenge is the need to better educate workforce staff about higher education options so that they can help clients make informed choices. From a policy perspective, state and local workforce agencies must identify policies that hinder the use of workforce funds for degree completion, such as requiring students to enroll full-time even if they don’t need a full semester’s worth of credits, with the goal of ensuring that caps on training funds don’t preclude college completion as an option. In addition, states can benefit from smoothing the process through which college degree-completion programs can be included on the local Eligible Training Provider List (Haviland et al 2014)).

Data and Accountability

In order for colleges and universities to be effective in providing services to returning adult students, they must have sufficient data to understand who these students are and to track their progress in terms of retention and completion. Disaggregating institutional data to allow this tracking as well as developing processes to collect and analyze additional data on returning adult students is a crucial aspect of addressing the needs of this population (Kazis 2007; Michelau and Lane 2010). Unfortunately, many postsecondary institutions have discovered that their data systems are not set up to easily identify this student population, and data-mining projects, such as several of those included in the Lumina adult college completion

initiative, clearly show the difficulties of identifying all students who meet certain criteria, not least among them the possibility that the college has changed student information systems at some point and now cannot pull data from dates prior to the transition (Adelman 2013).

As colleges and universities place more attention on adult students, the amount and quality of data about these students has improved. In a 2012 survey of institutional adult college completion project coordinators—two years into the Lumina work—68% said that they were seeing at least somewhat improved data on adult students, and that percentage increased to 76% in a 2014 survey of the same group (Higher Ed Insight 2012; Higher Ed Insight 2014a). Similarly, surveys of colleges and universities with large populations of nontraditional students showed that, as of 2013, 69% of responding institutions were disaggregating their institutional data to track the progress of adult students (versus 57% in 2011). However, the authors of this study caution that only about a fifth of responding institutions could actually provide retention and completion rates for these students (University Professional and Continuing Education Association and InsideTrack 2014).

While accurate data on returning adult students is essential to tracking their progress, colleges and universities must also be held accountable for the success of such students. A 2014 survey of open-access institutions found that very few have set explicit goals regarding non-first-time students and that there is very little accountability for the outcomes associated with this group of students (Parkay and Kilgore 2014). In many cases, the existence of statewide accountability systems that focus only on outcomes for first-time full-time students provide little external incentive for addressing the needs of this population (Kazis et al 2007). That situation is changing in some states. In South Dakota, for example, state colleges and universities are required to report completion

data for returning adult students, and the data is used as part of the calculation for performance funding (Lane 2012). Similarly, because West Virginia included adult students in its most recent strategic plan for higher education, colleges and universities in the state must report on outcomes for these students, a process that emphasizes their importance to state higher education goals (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014).

Promoting Academic Success for Adult Learners

A considerable body of research on adult learners makes clear that this student population tends to perform somewhat differently than traditional age students in academic settings. For example, research shows that adult learners prefer active learning strategies, appreciate opportunities for self-direction in learning, and prefer learning that is clearly applicable beyond the classroom setting (Kazis et al 2007; Ross-Gordon 2011). As the ALFI principles of effectiveness point out, these preferences require faculty to approach their jobs as “managers and facilitators of student learning, not primarily lecturers” (CAEL 2000).

While interest among faculty in active learning formats, ranging from flipped classrooms to problem-based and experiential learning, has increased considerably in recent years, not all faculty members are comfortable with or open to such methods. Recent research suggests that around 40% of faculty members have either adopted or are open to adopting one or more of these innovative teaching methods. Acceptance and use of these pedagogical innovations also vary across academic disciplines, with greater use in business, health sciences, and other pre-professional fields (McGoldrick, Watts, and Economou 2015). As a result, academic programs targeted to adult students may need to hire faculty with experience in adult education or support existing faculty in adopting new teaching methods. Colleges participating in the AACCC Plus 50 program, for example, have found it useful to



offer professional development opportunities for instructors that help them understand the needs of older adult students and adopt teaching strategies that address those needs (Learning for Action 2015).

Degree Programs

Adults with some college credit face particular academic challenges when returning to college to complete a degree. While in some cases, students want to continue in the same degree program in which they originally enrolled, others want to take a different direction, especially in cases where the original degree program led towards a career the students no longer wishes to pursue. Adults with work or childcare responsibilities also face time constraints that may limit the degree programs in which they can enroll. These challenges suggest that at least some returning adult students will benefit from degree programs structured to their needs. In a survey conducted by Higher Ed Insight, 51% of adult college completion project coordinators said that degree programs tailored to adults with some college credit are a very important service for adult students (Higher Ed Insight 2014a).

Degree-Completion Programs. Degree-completion programs exist exclusively to provide adults with some college credit the opportunity to complete a degree. In many cases, these degree programs offer an associate's or bachelor's degree in general studies, such as the Regents Bachelor of Arts and Board of Governors Associate in Applied Science degree programs offered by public colleges and universities in West Virginia, with requirements and course delivery options tailored to the needs of the student (Beasley, Gardner, and Johnson 2014). In South Dakota, for example, Board of Regents staff determined that many of the adults who had stopped out of state colleges and universities had been enrolled in professional programs, such as nursing, that they seemed unlikely to complete. To accommodate the specialized coursework these students had completed, while still offering them

an opportunity to complete a degree, led several institutions in the state to develop a general studies degree program intended to serve these students (Lane, Michelau, and Palmer 2012).

Both Oklahoma and Louisiana offer online bachelor's degree programs in organizational leadership that are a collaborative effort across several state universities. These programs are targeted to adults who have already earned considerable college credit and are offered in an accelerated format. To participate in the program, students must apply to a

While accurate data on returning adult students is essential to tracking their progress, colleges and universities must also be held accountable for the success of such students.

home institution, based on geographical proximity or academic concentration. These collaborative degree programs are advertised through each state's higher education agency and, with the same branding, through the participating universities (Erisman and Steele 2013). In other states, including Texas and Virginia, a number of different state universities offer bachelor's degree-completion programs, but the available majors vary depending on the institution. As a result, some regions of the state may be better served by these programs than others, particularly for a student who does not want to take online classes. On the other hand, this system allows each university to tailor degree-completion programs to local workforce needs, which may improve the chances that a student will be able to get a good job after completing the program (Bonham et al 2012; Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

Some online-only postsecondary institutions place adult students at the center of their mission.

These non-profit colleges and universities—including Excelsior College, Thomas Edison State College, University of Maryland University College, and Western Governor's University and its state-based affiliates—typically offer bachelor's, and in some instances associate's, degrees in career-oriented fields as well as selected liberal arts disciplines. These non-profit colleges and universities have been leaders in the assessment of prior learning and are typically more flexible in accepting transfer credits than more traditional institutions. In addition to helping adults with some college credit complete a degree, these institutions often serve many active military personnel and veterans. While not all returning adult students may be prepared to undertake an online degree, these institutions offer valuable opportunities to earn a degree for those who are comfortable with this format.

Career Pathways Programs. Another group of degree programs well suited to adults, including some with existing college credit, includes career pathways programs, which have received considerable attention in recent years. The career pathways concept is rooted in the recognition that many adults cannot afford to spend many years enrolled in postsecondary education before earning a credential that will help them obtain a job. Career pathways have multiple entry and exit points, each accompanied by a credential with labor-market value, so that students can move back and forth between education and employment or study for a higher level credential while employed in a job that requires a lower level one (Jacobs and Warford 2007; Clagett and Uhalde 2011; Alliance for Quality Career Pathways 2014).

For this process to work, the credentials must be stackable, that is, the earlier credentials are made up of pre-requisite coursework for the later credentials. Some career pathways are also latticed, which means that the initial credential offers opportunities to go in multiple directions. An example of a stackable and latticed career pathway

can be found in the health sciences, where an initial Certified Nursing Assistant credential helps students get employment and is the first step to earning a Registered Nurse credential but can also provide the pre-requisites needed to move from nursing into a range of allied health professions (Loochtan, Lang, and Harris 2015).

Research suggests that many pre-baccalaureate certificates do have the potential to yield increased earnings, particularly when the certificate holder is employed in a directly related field. However, a key point is to recognize that, as with any degree, certificates vary in their labor market value based both on field and the local economy (Carnevale, Rose, and Hanson 2012). Certificates in fields that are in high demand in a local labor market are more likely to be of value to students, particularly when those certificates offer the opportunity to obtain industry-recognized certifications, such as those endorsed by the National Association of Manufacturers (Kennedy Consulting LLC 2013). As a result, effective career pathway programs must engage actively with local employers and workforce agencies to ensure that the programs meet employers' needs and will lead to jobs for program graduates (Jacobs and Warford 2007; Clagett and Uhalde 2011; Alliance for Quality Career Pathways 2014).

The most effective career pathway programs also include considerable support for the student, including integrated basic or remedial coursework that connects essential skills in reading, writing, and math with career-specific content. Students in career pathways programs typically receive career advising, job search assistance, and opportunities to gain work experience through experiential programs such as internships. Many such programs also take a case management approach, offering students referrals to social services that can help ensure that students complete a credential (Jacobs and Warford 2007; Clagett and Uhalde 2011; Alliance for Quality Career Pathways 2014).

Course Scheduling and Delivery

Regardless of the degree program in which they enroll, returning adult students can benefit from course scheduling and delivery methods that accommodate their complex lives. Research conducted in Louisiana, for example, found that adults with some college credit preferred online courses over face-to-face or blended courses that required them to attend at specific times and places. Returning adult students also very much preferred accelerated courses that would allow them to complete a degree more quickly (Dowden 2007). Meeting these needs can be crucial to helping adult students return to college and successfully complete a degree or certificate.

Online Education. Online education is one of the most important ways that colleges and universities can meet the needs of their adult students. The ability to engage in a course at a time and location most convenient for the student can lead to college completion that would otherwise not be possible for some students, and flexibility and convenience have been found to be the primary reasons students choose online classes (Jaggars 2014). In a 2008 survey of adult learners, for example, 48% of students said that they are likely or very likely to enroll in online courses. The survey

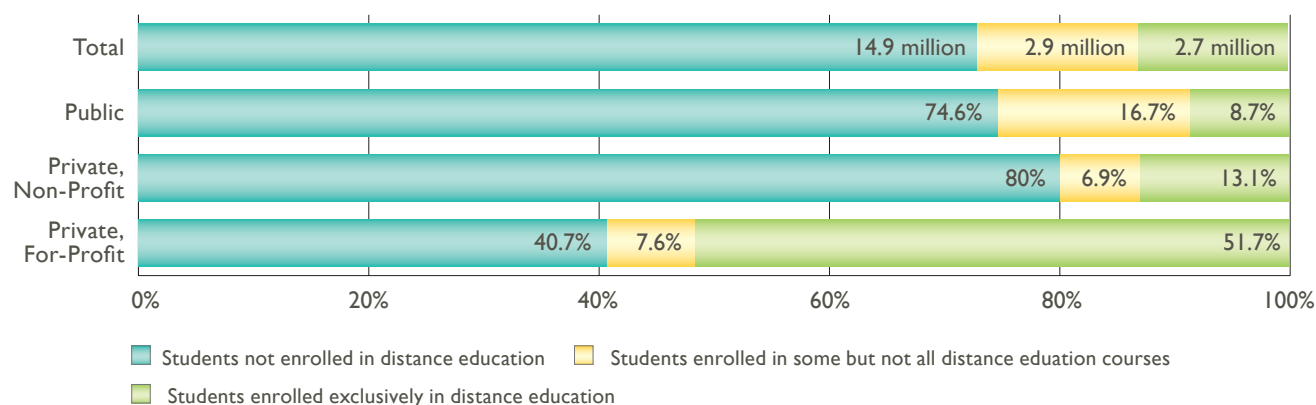
also found that, among adults in the 35-54 age range, which are the prime years for balancing work and family, online courses were much preferred over campus-based courses (Eduventures 2008).

This interest in online education can be seen in the dramatic increases in online offerings over the last decade. As of 2014, 71% of degree-granting postsecondary institutions offer at least some courses online, including more than 95% of institutions with more than 5,000 students (Allen and Seaman 2015). Between Fall 2002 and Fall 2012, the number of students taking at least one online course from a degree-granting institution increased by 345%, to over 7 million students (Allen and Seaman 2014).² As of Fall 2013, more than one-quarter (27%) of all postsecondary students were enrolled in at least one distance education course (see Figure 8). However, at for-profit institutions, the percentages were much higher, with nearly three-fifths (59%) of students taking at least one distance education course and over half (52%) enrolled exclusively in distance education (Straut and Poulin 2015).

Despite this considerable growth in online education, questions remain about its quality.

² These enrollment numbers are based on Babson Survey Research Group's annual institutional survey. While IPEDS has begun to collect data on online enrollment, only two years of data are available at this point.

FIGURE 8: Student Enrollment in Distance Education By Sector, Fall 2013



Source: Straut, Terri Taylor, and Russ Poulin. 2015. "IPEDS Fall 2013: Higher Ed Sectors Vary Greatly in Distance Ed Enrollments." *WCET Blog*.

In 2014, nearly three-quarters (74%) of chief academic officers reported that they see learning outcomes for online course to be the same or superior to face-to-face courses, up from less than half (48%) of this group in 2003. However, nearly two-fifths of these individuals also reported that a lack of acceptance of online degrees by employers is an important or very important barrier to growth in online education (Allen and Seaman 2015). This concern does not seem unwarranted. A 2013 survey of human resource professionals found that 56% would prefer to hire a candidate with a traditional education from an average school versus 17% who would prefer to hire someone with an online degree from a top school. More than two-fifths (42%) of the survey respondents also think that students learn less from an online-only degree program. However, the human resources professionals did acknowledge the value of online degree and certificate programs for working adults, with 80% agreeing at least somewhat that such program are an opportunity for older students to earn valuable credentials (Public Agenda 2013b).

Online courses do seem to be more challenging for students. More than two-thirds (68%) of chief academic officers in 2014 agreed that students need more discipline to perform well in online classes and nearly half (45%) agreed that it is harder to retain students in online classes (Allen and Seaman 2015). Studies conducted using large statewide data sets from Washington and Virginia have concluded that, controlling for various student characteristics, students are significantly more likely to drop or fail online courses than they are face-to-face courses (Xu and Jaggars 2011a; Xu and Jaggars 2011b). On the other hand, research also shows that, while students age 25 and older perform less well in online classes than they do in face-to-face classes, the drop in performance is less pronounced than for younger students, leading researchers to suggest that the flexibility of online learning versus a small drop in academic performance may be a reasonable

trade-off for working adults (Xu and Jaggars 2013).

Improving outcomes for students enrolled in online classes may require investment in faculty development to help online instructors teach in ways that best support their students. For many faculty members, online education is still an object of suspicion. A recent survey of postsecondary faculty found that while almost a third (31%) have tried fully online course delivery, only 22% feel prepared

The most effective career pathway programs also include considerable support for the student, including integrated basic or remedial coursework that connects essential skills in reading, writing, and math with career-specific content. Students in career pathways programs typically receive career advising, job search assistance, and opportunities to gain work experience through experiential programs such as internships.

to teach online and only 11% believe online course delivery offers considerable benefits to students (McGoldrick, Watts, and Economou 2015). In 2014, 72% of chief academic officers reported that faculty at their institutions do not accept the value and legitimacy of online education, and 57% see this lack of acceptance as a barrier to the growth of online education (Allen and Seaman 2015).

Alternative Course Scheduling. While online education addresses many concerns adults may have about fitting college into already busy schedules, the reality is that online coursework does not work for everyone. Some adults are less comfortable with computers than others or do not have reliable

access to the internet, some may be enrolled in career and technical programs for which their physical presence on campus is required, and some may prefer the in-person interaction of a college classroom. Focus groups with community college students, for example, found that most students preferred to take courses they perceived as difficult in a face-to-face format so as to benefit from increased instructor feedback and guidance (Jaggars 2014). For these students, course scheduling can be a major concern. Adults who are working full-time or have child care responsibilities may need to attend class outside of a traditional Monday to Friday daytime schedule, and some adult students, especially those with varying work schedules, may find it difficult to enroll for a full semester.

While many colleges have long offered classes on nights and weekends, research suggests that many adult students need more flexibility to succeed in college (Kazis et al 2007). Examples of innovative course delivery approaches tailored to working adults include accelerated or compressed classes that allow students to take several courses sequentially during a single term (rather than all at the same time) modular classes that break down full courses into smaller units, and open entry/exit policies that allow students to drop a class one term and then pick up where they left off in a later term. To make it easier for adults to attend class, some colleges also offer degree programs at satellite campuses or other locations more convenient than the main campus (Choitz and Prince 2008). These sorts of innovations reflect lessons learned from the for-profit sector, which has been offering flexible courses at multiple locations for some time (Kazis et al 2007).

Alternative Approaches to Awarding Credit

A final area important to supporting academic success for adult students is the growth of alternative approaches to awarding college credit. Returning adults, as well as older students enrolling in college for the first time, come to college with

a wide variety of learning under their belts. To avoid requiring these students to take courses on subjects they already know, adult-friendly colleges are offering or seeking to offer ways for students to earn college credit by demonstrating learning or competencies in specific subject areas.

A particular challenge raised by alternative approaches to awarding credit is their relationship to the current financial aid system. While the federal government is exploring the question of how to distribute financial aid to students who earn credit in ways other than the traditional credit hour

Improving outcomes for students enrolled in online classes may require investment in faculty development to help online instructors teach in ways that best support their students. For many faculty members, online education is still an object of suspicion.

system through its experimental sites program, there remain many unanswered questions related to issues such as what constitutes full- or part-time enrollment in such programs, how to judge satisfactory academic progress, and whether to offer aid for competency-based remedial coursework (Porter 2014). State financial aid programs face similar challenges, particularly in terms of determining when to distribute aid if the degree program does not follow the typical academic calendar and, in fact, may not really be tied to a particular timeframe at all. States, on the other hand, may have the flexibility to allow practices that ease the complexity of offering financial aid for competency-based programs, including allowing individual colleges and universities to define what constitutes satisfactory academic progress (Bell and Conklin 2014).

Prior Learning Assessment. Many adults who have completed some college stop their studies to enter the workforce, where they gain skills and knowledge through their work experience as well as through formal training they may receive on the job. Colleges can evaluate this learning and grant credit for specific courses in a number of different ways, including:

- Standardized exams such as Advanced Placement (AP), College Level Examination Program (CLEP), Excelsior College Exams, DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) Exams, and foreign language proficiency tests;
- Evaluation of corporate and military training by third-party providers such as the American Council on Education (ACE)'s Credit Recommendation Service;
- Evaluation of corporate and military training by individual postsecondary institutions;
- Institutionally designed “challenge” exams; and
- Assessment of individualized student portfolios demonstrating learning in a specific area (Klein-Collins 2010; Lakin et al 2015).

Proponents of prior learning assessment (PLA) argue that obtaining credit for prior learning will reduce both the cost of a degree program and the time it takes to complete a degree and will increase persistence and graduation rates for adult students. A study of more than 62,000 students at 48 postsecondary institutions, for example, found that students who received credit through PLA had higher graduation and persistence rates than other adult students (Klein-Collins 2010).

While the evidence to support the potential value of PLA for students remains limited, policymakers, colleges, students, employers and other stakeholders are increasingly interested in this approach. In a survey of campus-based adult college completion coordinators conducted by Higher Ed Insight, more than half (55%) indicated

that PLA was very important in establishing services for adult students (Higher Ed Insight 2014a). Similarly, although only one among the 10 adult college completion projects funded by Lumina in 2010 focused on PLA in their grant-funded work, by the end of four years, all 10 of the core grantees were looking into incorporating PLA into their projects.

Adults who are working full-time or have child care responsibilities may need to attend class outside of a traditional Monday to Friday daytime schedule, and some adult students, especially those with varying work schedules, may find it difficult to enroll for a full semester.

Several new projects also demonstrate the heightened interest in PLA. In 2010, CAEL launched LearningCounts.org with funding from a number of foundations. The website serves as a resource for individuals, institutions, employers, and workforce systems seeking information on PLA. In addition, students can enroll in an online PLA course, which has been recommended for three college credits by ACE, and receive assistance in creating a portfolio, which is then assessed by trained faculty members and awarded a credit recommendation. Partnerships with over 100 colleges and universities provide students with opportunities to apply that credit to a degree program (Lane 2012). At the state university system level, the Prior Learning Assessment Expansion Initiative was created by the University of Wisconsin System (UWS) to increase the availability and utilization of PLA opportunities throughout the system, as well as to address issues



with the portability of PLA credit among UWS campuses. The project has addressed the piecemeal approach taken to PLA by system institutions in the past and has advanced the use of PLA beyond AP and CLEP exams. UWS has now established shared principles on the use and transferability of PLA and has instituted statewide training on a variety of PLA practices. UWS is also supporting a number of pilot institutions in efforts to more fully incorporate PLA on their campuses (Erisman and Steele 2013; Rusk and Smith 2014).

The increasing number of adults enrolling in college, combined with the need for better educated workers, has led to the development of a number of statewide PLA initiatives. Kansas, Kentucky and Michigan—as part of the Adult Completion Policy Project led by Jobs for the Future (JFF)—have put together state teams to examine existing PLA practices and develop uniform policies across state institutions. As a result of this work, Kansas and Kentucky each produced handbooks on PLA to guide changes at the institutional level, and Michigan elected to integrate PLA in their career pathways programs (JFF 2013). Pennsylvania recently launched [College Credit FastTrack](#), a website that gives adult students a centralized portal for earning credit for prior learning from the state’s community colleges. For states interested in developing PLA programs in the future, a resource guide has been developed that provides information for state policymakers on various considerations such as how to set fees, methods of assessment, transfer and articulation of PLA credit, providing transcripts for PLA credit, working with state workforce systems, and raising awareness about PLA among faculty and prospective students (CAEL and HCM Strategists 2012).

Research shows that adult students see PLA as an important element of their education. A survey of students who participated in portfolio assessments through LearningCounts.org found these students chose to pursue PLA because they

wanted to finish degree programs faster (90%) and did not want to take courses on topics they felt they already knew (81%). Other motivations included saving money (79%) and wanting to get to higher-level courses more quickly (62%). The students surveyed indicated that they found the PLA process valuable because it helped them to organize their thoughts and decisions (53%) and provided savings

While the evidence to support the potential value of PLA for students remains limited, policymakers, colleges, students, employers and other stakeholders are increasingly interested in this approach.

in cost and time (50%). The vast majority (83%) said that they also experienced a sense of “personal pride” after finishing their portfolios (Zalek 2013). Support for PLA is also strong among the general public. A 2013 national opinion poll, for example, found that 87% of respondents believe that a student should be able to earn credit for knowledge and skills acquired outside the classroom and 75% would be more likely to enroll in a college program if they could receive credit for what they already know (Gallup 2013).

One challenge surrounding PLA is that PLA acceptance and policies vary from one campus to another (and sometimes even across different departments on a single campus), making the entire enterprise challenging for students to navigate. Such a situation leaves open many questions about the transportability of PLA credit for students who transfer to another college or university. Additionally, while many institutions have PLA policies on the books, without the engagement of faculty and the establishment of a campus-wide culture promoting PLA, the actual practice of awarding PLA credit ends up falling short. At



present, data on PLA acceptance and transferability is inadequate even within state systems, making it difficult to fully understand how PLA is being used, the extent to which students are being awarded credit, and the extent to which those students persist in and/or complete their studies (Rusk and Smith 2014; Lakin et al 2015).

While many challenges associated with PLA remain, the recent interest in and expansion of PLA has led to documentation of some effective practices for implementing PLA at the institutional, state, or system level. First and foremost is faculty engagement. Getting input from faculty throughout the process of establishing a new PLA policy or system is critical to the success of the effort, as faculty members are sometimes uncomfortable with the idea of awarding credit for learning accomplished outside the institution and need to be reassured that the evaluation process is rigorous (Erisman and Steele 2013; Rusk and Smith 2014; Lakin et al 2015). It is also crucial that institutions establish clear policies about the forms of PLA they will accept, the process used to apply for PLA credit, and the standards for awarding such credit and then make those policies readily available to students. Additionally, some of the current best practice models suggest that having a one-stop consolidated service point for PLA with dedicated personnel and using technology as a tool to raise student awareness of PLA are critical to successful PLA efforts (Lakin et al 2015).

Competency-Based Education. Competency-based education (CBE) is defined as “a form of higher education in which credit is provided on the basis of student learning rather than credit or clock hours” (Kelchen 2015). Like PLA, CBE provides a pathway to higher education opportunity with potentially lower costs, and perhaps even more importantly, a self-paced approach, providing students with greater flexibility in earning a credential. While the assessment of student competencies has always been a key part of higher

education and competency-based programs such as those offered by Alverno College and Western Governors University have existed for some time (Klein-Collins 2013; Book 2014), new attention to CBE programs has recently emerged as a significant force in the higher education community.

The core elements of CBE include advancement based on skills mastery, self-pacing, and customized instruction (Soares 2012; Klein-Collins 2013; Le, Wolfe, and Steinberg 2014). There is no one way that CBE works in the landscape of offerings available today in higher education. CBE programs sometimes assess student competencies within the traditional context of courses and credit hours; other programs offer full degrees based on various competencies, often completed at whatever pace the student desires (Porter and Reilly 2014). The CBE model also varies in its method of delivery, with some programs online and others face-to-face or a mix of both. CBE programs may be led by an instructor or self-led through online open resources, with competencies assessed using varying methods such as exams, written assignments, or portfolio presentations (Klein-Collins 2013)

Experts see the growth in interest in CBE as fueled by the intersection between a growing acceptance of the need for learning standards at all educational levels and the potential for technological solutions that allow personalization in education (Soares 2012; Le, Wolfe, and Steinberg 2014). Federal, state, and institutional investment in CBE has also gained momentum with efforts like the federal Race to the Top competition, which has encouraged the use of competency-based approaches in K-12 (Le, Wolfe, and Steinberg 2014). Interest in CBE has also emerged among students. Returning adults, particularly those working full-time, want to be able to pursue programs at their own pace and in a flexible format (Porter and Reilly 2014). Public support for CBE can be seen in the results of a national opinion poll, in which 70% of respondents indicated that, if a



student demonstrates mastery of course material in shorter time than average college course, they should be able to get credit for the course without completing the full course (Gallup 2013).

New CBE programs have emerged at a rapid rate in recent years. A recent study identified 52 colleges in the U.S. with current or planned CBE programs, including 34 that are actively enrolling students in degree programs in which students receive credit through PLA and/or competency-based courses. Across the nine colleges in this study that were found to be strictly competency-based, more than 143,000 undergraduate students are currently engaged in this sort of educational program, with only about 10% of these students under the age of 25. While there are undoubtedly many more students engaged in CBE at other institutions, data on them are not available through existing national datasets, and moreover, the definition of CBE varies from campus to campus (Kelchen 2015).

Examples of recent CBE initiatives include the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, which built its online Learn on Demand program to benefit working students who can start and finish online course modules at their own pace and move forward as soon they pass the assessments integrated into each module. Learn on Demand options include workforce-focused certificate and associate's degree programs but also more general associate's degrees, credit for which can be transferred to state universities (HCM Strategists n.d.). Southern New Hampshire University's College for America offers an associate's degree structured solely around competencies. Students can move through the competencies as quickly as they wish and are able and are charged a flat yearly fee, regardless of the number of competencies completed. Northern Arizona University's Personalized Learning program uses a similar format for competency-based bachelor's degree programs in liberal arts, computer information technology, and business administration (Klein-Collins 2013).

As more CBE programs enter the picture, sharing lessons learned and building state and institutional capacity for this type of higher education is becoming a critical need. Funded in part by Lumina, the [Competency-Based Education Network](#) was formed to address some of the challenges of designing and scaling up CBE degree programs. The network currently includes 17 institutions and two public systems serving 42 campuses and hopes to provide an “evidence-based approach to advancing high-quality competency-based education capable of serving many more students of all backgrounds” (Competency-Based Education Network 2014-15).

One of the greatest challenges to CBE is its divergence from the long tradition of higher education with its focus on course-based instruction and credit hours. Supporters of CBE often focus on the value of competencies over credit hours in learning, arguing that competency-based approaches ensure that students have learned the skills and knowledge they need from a degree program. Opponents, on the other hand, question the quality of the CBE and the value of competency-based credentials. As with PLA, a crucial aspect of implementing CBE is the need to build faculty support, since the role played by faculty members in CBE programs is quite different than the type of classroom instruction to which most faculty are accustomed (Book 2014; Porter and Reilly 2014). Documenting the value of CBE credentials in the workforce is an area that has yet to be addressed, although the concept has found support among industry representatives, particularly when they are actively engaged in helping define the competencies in their field (Porter and Reilly 2014). If industries and employers begin to employ graduates from CBE programs, higher education may be encouraged to adopt a greater acceptance of CBE and make accommodations for this new way of doing business, alongside traditional postsecondary education approaches.

CBE programs must also get a handle on the cost of these programs, as to date there is no confirmed evidence that students are saving money by obtaining CBE degrees (Kelchen 2015). As one report noted, “From the student perspective, cost savings depend on the type of program the student enrolls in and the pace through the program. From the institutional perspective, cost savings depend on exactly how the competency-based program is implemented” (Porter and Reilly 2014). The cost of innovation is also a challenge with CBE, with early adopters noting that the start-up costs for a CBE program are quite high and include time spent developing admissions standards, fee structures, learning materials, assessments, mastery standards, and transcripts, as well as rethinking issues such as faculty workload and pay structure, student support services, and the maintenance of student records (Book 2014; Porter and Reilly 2014).

Strategic Partnerships to Support Adult College Completion

Engaging in strategic partnerships to expand organizational capacity to support adult students is one of the eight ALFI principles of effectiveness recommended by CAEL. Strategic partnerships can enhance outreach, support services, and academic success for adult students in a variety of ways. Examples range from straightforward agreements between state higher education and motor vehicles agencies to obtain updated addresses for adult stop-outs, to national partnerships such as the one between SREB’s TheAdultLearner.org and CAEL’s LearningCounts.org, which provide access to information about earning credit for prior learning for users of the SREB website.

In fact, the last several years have seen the development of several national partnerships that are likely to smooth the way for adults with some college credit in the future. These partnerships include the National Council for State Authorization

Reciprocity Agreements, which will make it easier for online degree programs to operate in multiple states, C-BEN, which supports the development of competency-based education programs, and the Adult College Completion Network (ACCN), which offers opportunities for networking, information sharing, and collaboration among adult college completion programs. These partnerships

CBE provides a pathway to higher education opportunity with potentially lower costs, and perhaps even more importantly, a self-paced approach, providing students with greater flexibility in earning a credential.

clearly have the potential to be significant players in higher education over the next few years. Moreover, the same time frame has seen considerable increases in partnerships among postsecondary institutions at the state level as well as broader community partnerships intended to promote increases in postsecondary attainment for a metro region. Such partnerships will likely play an essential role in the future as more postsecondary institutions come to recognize the necessity of supporting adult students.

The Adult College Completion Network (ACCN)

One of the strategies used by Lumina Foundation in its adult college completion efforts was to create ACCN, supported by a grant to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) for coordination of the network. As of September 2013, the network had 544 members, primarily from individual postsecondary institutions (39%) and state agencies or higher education systems (17%). ACCN offers access to information about adult college completion projects on its website, through



an email distribution list, which is used by participants to ask questions and share information about their work, and through periodic webinars on topics of interest to adult college completion stakeholders. ACCN also held invitation-only convenings during the first several years of the project, and the later convenings included quite a few representatives from projects not part of the original group.

Responses to a December 2013 survey of network members suggest that ACCN members find the network valuable (see Figure 9), with a substantial majority of participants saying the network is at least somewhat useful in providing

access to the latest research/expertise (85%), identifying effective and practical strategies and practices (80%), and providing opportunities to network with a wide range of experts and other practitioners (76%). However, 78% of respondents said that they were unable to identify a new strategy they had learned about through ACCN and then implemented in their own work, suggesting that an email list alone is insufficient to disseminate new strategies. In fact, ACCN members who had attended one or more convenings both expressed greater overall satisfaction with the network (65% said they were very satisfied versus 44% of those who had not attended a convening) and were much more likely to report having used strategies

FIGURE 9: Perceived Benefits of Adult College Completion Network Among Members, 2013



Source: Higher Ed Insight. 2014b. *Adult College Completion Network: Building a Learning Network to Support Adult Student Success*. Washington, DC: Higher Ed Insight.

learned through the network in their work (48% versus 9%), demonstrating the importance on in-person meetings for this sort of network (Higher Ed Insight 2014b).

ACCN membership, while valuable as an educational resource, does not necessarily seem to translate into action. Nonetheless, survey respondents indicated that there are few other centralized sources of information about serving adult learners, particularly those with some college credit (Higher Ed Insight 2014b). The extent to which ACCN has been able to connect postsecondary institutions and state agency or system staff with the work of non-profits focusing on adult college completion, workforce training, and other disparate groups that serve adult learners suggests that this sort of national network will be needed as the nation moves towards a time when adults may become the majority of postsecondary students.

State Networks of Adult-Friendly Institutions

Forming partnerships among adult-serving colleges and universities is another way to promote degree completion for adults with some college credit. Recognizing that not all postsecondary institutions have a mission to serve adult students, several states have established networks of state colleges and universities that are oriented toward serving adult students and work primarily with those institutions in their efforts to promote adult degree completion (Erisman and Steele 2013). Forming such networks is a practice considered very important to increasing adult degree completion by just over half (52%) of adult degree completion stakeholders responding to a 2014 national survey (Erisman and Steele 2014a).

Having an active statewide network of adult-friendly institutions helps promote the idea that adult college completion is a group effort. This collaborative approach has not always been the norm in higher education and demonstrates a

move to approaching adult college completion from a student-centered perspective in many of the states engaged in this work. One particular benefit of a statewide network seems to be to create opportunities for campus-level faculty and staff whose work focuses on adult students to learn from one another. Participation in the network also helps ensure that adult degree completion coordinators from each institution know one another and can direct students to a coordinator at a different campus if needed. Ivy Tech, for example, has its 14 Regional Adult Degree Completion Advisers meet regularly via conference call. The college has also sponsored joint workshops with Indiana University to provide an opportunity for faculty and staff from both institutions to connect around the topics of adult degree completion and supporting adult-student transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. Oklahoma regularly brings together its Reach Higher adult college completion program coordinators to share ideas about how to better serve returning adult students. Similarly, Kentucky, despite losing much of the funding for its Project Graduate, has continued to convene meetings of the project's campus representatives so that they can strategize about ways to continue to re-engage and support stop-outs at each institution (Erisman and Steele 2013).

The development of common institutional policies around key areas related to adult learners is another benefit of statewide networks of adult-friendly institutions. Georgia is a clear leader in this area. The executive committee of its Adult Learning Consortium, made up of campus representatives from both academic and student affairs, meets regularly to discuss what is happening on each campus and to identify areas where policy change is needed. A typical approach for the group is to look at each institution's policies in a certain area, such as accepting various forms of credit for prior learning, and then work out a policy that will be used by all member institutions in the future.

Once consensus is reached on this policy, a formal agreement is drawn up and signed by each campus president and vice president for both academic and student affairs. As a result, the campuses currently in the consortium have consistent policies regarding acceptance of credit for prior learning and use a common vocabulary on their adult-focused web pages (Erisman and Steele 2013).

Even without a formal network, engagement in a statewide adult college completion campaign can further partnerships within the higher education community. During WVHEPC's DegreeNow project, for example, an evaluation found an increase in collaboration between institutions as staff came to better understand the mission and campus cultures of different institutions and benefited from sharing strategies for improving the experiences of adult learners. Among other factors, participants identified the project newsletter issued by WVHEPC as an important tool for keeping participants up to date on the progress of the overall project, raising awareness of upcoming trainings and other events, and sharing effective practices across institutions (Project on Academic Success 2013).

State Partnerships to Expand Career Pathways

Another form of statewide partnership that can benefit adults with some college credit can be seen in efforts to build career pathways for high-demand occupations. A number of such projects have been funded by the federal government in recent rounds of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program. Examples of such programs include the Maryland Cyber-Technology Job Pathways Consortium and the Kentucky Consortia for Information Technology Job Pathways in Computer and Medical Fields, both of which bring together community colleges and employers to develop degrees and certificates in high tech fields (The White House, Office of the Vice President 2014).

The Manufacturing Institute has built on past work in this area to develop new statewide agreements that encourage community colleges to offer industry-recognized credentials in advanced manufacturing. The timing of this project was particularly fortuitous, as it coincided with the TAACCCT program and other federal efforts to expand the use of portable and stackable credentials. An external evaluation of this project found that it had yielded increases in the number of certifications offered and awarded. The number of certifications awarded in the 12 participating states increased by 17% between 2011 and 2012 alone. The evaluators concluded that collaboration was key to that success. In particular, the Manufacturing Institute conducted state-level convenings that brought together key stakeholders to help them develop a shared awareness of workforce needs and how higher education must change to accommodate them. However, even with high-level buy-in from state officials and business associations, expanding the acceptance of industry credentials among postsecondary leaders proved challenging, especially given the autonomy of individual community colleges in many states. The project's success, therefore, lay in building and maintaining partnerships between colleges and local employers (Kennedy Consulting LLC 2013).

Community Partnerships to Increase Postsecondary Completion

Given the general consensus among experts that most adult students are place-bound, one crucial strategy for local or regional efforts to increase college completion should be to include this population. This strategy is considered very important to increasing adult degree completion by two-thirds (65%) of adult college completion stakeholders (Erisman and Steele 2014a). Lumina's multi-million dollar investment in 75 metro regions through the Community Partnership for Attainment initiative therefore provides an especially valuable opportunity to encourage

community partnerships to include adults with some college credit in their projects and to learn from earlier work done in this area. Two projects that became part of ACCN—the Talent Dividend Prize and the National League of Cities Institute’s Postsecondary Success City Action Network (P-SCAN)—were designed to promote and support community partnership efforts to increase postsecondary completion. Many of the cities participating in one or both of these projects are now part of the Community Partnerships for Attainment effort, and the National League of Cities Institute is serving as a strategic partner and technical assistance provider for that initiative.

Research and evaluation efforts focusing on these projects and others have provided a clear sense of some of the most important factors that lead to successful community partnerships. Among these factors are a clear vision and goals for postsecondary attainment in the community; an individual dedicated to the work, preferably a city staff member; commitment and active involvement by leaders across key sectors; processes and structures to help build and maintain commitment within and across partner organizations; public media campaigns to build strong brand recognition; short-term strategies to spur action while also planning for the longer term; an emphasis on removing policy barriers to college access and success; adequate funding, including resources provided by partners; and evidence-based decision-making that draws on data available from a range of partners (Cohen 2012; Harmon 2014; Miller et al 2014; OMG Center for Collaborative Learning 2014).

However, while recognizing that achieving attainment goals will require attention to adults with some college credit (Cohen 2012), most community partnerships engaged in efforts to increase postsecondary attainment have found it difficult to incorporate adults with some college credit into their work. In a survey of cities engaged in this work conducted by Higher Ed Insight,

nearly 80% of respondents reported that their cities are developing outreach efforts specifically targeted toward working adults with some college credit, but less than half (46%) said that their efforts have been fully implemented (Erisman and Steele 2013). As noted earlier, adults are more difficult to reach than K-12 students, and community partnerships have struggled both to conduct effective outreach to this population and to find ways to support returning adult students as they go through the process of re-enrolling in college. Some cities also found that it can be difficult to draw public and media attention to the needs of adult students and that they had to make a stronger case for targeting this population.

The work of the National League of Cities Institute (NLCI) offers some possible ways to alleviate these challenges. The P-SCAN project brought together mayor’s educational staff members for monthly conference calls, an annual meeting, and an online community. These resources proved valuable to the participating cities, who were often able to learn from each other’s experiences. However, project staff noted that this approach could be more effective if the larger network were broken into subgroups based on factors such as city size or project focus. A second NLCI project, Cities Advancing Postsecondary Success (CAPS), provided more intensive technical assistance to a subset of P-SCAN cities, which enabled those cities to benefit from the support of NLCI staff and to tap into the resources of the broader P-SCAN network. These two approaches could be applied to the issue of adults with some college credit by creating a network of cities interested in targeting this prospective student group and by using the lessons learned from ACCN members and others to provide technical assistance in this area.

Community-Based Organizations. While postsecondary institutions are essential participants in any community partnership focused on increasing higher education attainment, some partnerships



are finding that their efforts to recruit and support adults with some college credit are more effective when located in a community-based organization. In a survey of adults, many with existing college credit who are planning to enroll in college within a few years, more than half (52%) of respondents indicated that holding workshops with college experts at community centers or similar venues would be very helpful to prospective adult students. Moreover, during focus groups, these prospective students noted that they would like to receive impartial assistance in selecting a college and navigating the complex world of college admission and financial aid (Public Agenda 2013a).

This desire for impartial help is a likely explanation for the success of Graduate! Philadelphia, which provides resources and advising services for what they call “comebackers,” adults with some college credit who want to complete a degree or certificate. Graduate! Philadelphia supports prospective students through each step of the process of returning to college through various means. The organization offers a website with resources about re-enrolling in college; in-person advising sessions at a centrally located outreach office, workforce one-stop career centers, and community-based organizations around the city; and advising via telephone and email. This approach to serving adults with some college credit is relatively inexpensive, with a cost of approximately \$30 per student each year. In addition, over five years, Graduate! Philadelphia has seen nearly 60% of all students served re-enroll in college while 79% of those who enrolled for at least one semester have completed or are close to completing a degree (Sheffer 2014; Sheffer and Mattleman 2015).

Graduate! Philadelphia now serves as the flagship for the Graduate! Network, which includes affiliates in Connecticut, Chicago, Memphis, Greensboro, Louisville, South Jersey,

Nashville, Jacksonville, and Columbia (Sheffer and Mattleman 2015). The Graduate! affiliates have adapted Graduate! Philadelphia’s model as needed to meet their own community needs, but their focus remains on assisting adults with some college credit complete a college degree (Erisman and Steele 2013). Using the experience of these affiliates as a guide, the Graduate! Network has developed a handbook that explains the steps new programs need to take and provides assessment tools, model documents, and other resources to smooth the process of adapting the program model to local needs (Sheffer 2014). As part of its Community Partnerships for Attainment initiative, Lumina is providing support for a Graduate! Network expansion to some of the participating metro areas.

Goodwill’s Community College/ Career Collaboration (C4) program takes a somewhat different approach to serving adult students by creating partnerships between Goodwill affiliates and local community colleges to expand career training opportunities for the low-income population served by Goodwill. Some of the C4 programs emphasize GED completion and non-credit career/technical training, but the focus of Seattle Goodwill’s program is to assist vulnerable adults in making the transition to community college enrollment. These potential college students can enroll free of charge in a for-credit Community College 101 class, taught at Goodwill sites, that gives them the tools needed to navigate the higher education system, including skills such as self-advocacy, time management, and goal setting, as well as opportunities to explore potential careers and learn about the education required for them. A Goodwill College Navigator then helps students with college applications, registration, financial aid, and other enrollment challenges. Seattle Goodwill also helps these students financially by covering tuition, fees, and books for the student’s first two terms in college. Once students are close to completing a credential, they can return to Seattle

Goodwill to work with an employment specialist (Erisman 2014b).

A key factor in the success of community-based programs serving adults with some college credit is the development of relationships with adult-friendly postsecondary institutions in the relevant metro area. North Seattle Community College, for example, provides grant funds to support Seattle Goodwill's Community College 101 class, which was developed with input from the college (Erisman 2014b). The Graduate! Network model emphasizes making connections with multiple local colleges. Graduate! Philadelphia has an advisory council with representatives from its 10 partner colleges and works with these partners to identify institutional policies that pose barriers to returning adult students as well as best practices to overcome those barriers and support students through graduation (Erisman and Steele 2013). Participating colleges are also expected to provide eight hours per month in advising time at one of the Graduate! Philadelphia locations. These close relationships help the community-based program offer the most up-to-date information about specific colleges to potential students and can also help the postsecondary institutions by offering a pool of adults ready to return to college and by providing feedback on practices that may be creating barriers to their return (Sheffer and Mattleman 2015).

Workforce and Industry. Among adults planning a return to college in the next few years, 46% indicated that employer-sponsored workplace events with college experts would be very helpful to prospective adult students (Public Agenda 2013a). Employer engagement was also raised by ACCN members as an important strategy for reaching adults with some college credit. ACCN participants suggested a number of ways to boost employer involvement in college completion efforts, including working with partner employers to clarify what kinds of further education would enhance their employees value to them; raising

awareness of low-cost or no-cost steps employers can take to support student employees, such as offering flexible schedules, providing a place to study during breaks, or including educational goals

A key factor in the success of community-based programs serving adults with some college credit is the development of relationships with adult-friendly postsecondary institutions in the relevant metro area.

in employee reviews; and suggesting that tuition assistance programs should cover the cost of prior learning assessments (Lane 2012; McKay and Lane 2013).

One adult college completion project, Louisville's Degrees at Work, set out to partner directly with employers to promote degree completion. As originally envisioned, project staff would survey participating companies' employees to identify interested individuals, designate a "college advocate" on each company's human resources staff, and offer college-going information at the workplace (Erisman and Steele 2013). However implementing the Degrees at Work model proved more difficult than anticipated. Among the challenges Degrees at Work encountered were the amount of staff time it took to bring companies on board. Despite the project's location within the regional chamber of commerce, staff found that companies needed individual attention before they were ready to sign onto the project. In addition, a crucial challenge was developing an effective process for providing one-on-one assistance to prospective students at participating companies. Project staff found that its college advocates had neither the time nor the expertise to counsel individuals about college choices, and the

staff themselves quickly became overwhelmed with requests for assistance from students. As Louisville moved to create its own Graduate! Network affiliate, it became clear that Degrees at Work could serve most effectively as a bridge between that organization and local employers.

As part of its Adult Completion Policy Project, Jobs for the Future worked with the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) on a plan to identify students who had earned college credit through customized training programs set up for their local employers by the community and technical colleges and then transition these individuals into programs leading to a postsecondary credential. Workforce Transition Coordinators, located at each college and funded by KCTCS, were tasked with contacting these students. As of 2014, these coordinators had re-enrolled 1,220 students, of whom 663 have completed degrees or certificates. Moreover, at many colleges, the Workforce Transitions Coordinator have become the go-to person for career-seeking adults interested in enrolling at the college (Erisman 2014a).

Local workforce investment boards and one-stop career centers are also important partners for reaching and assisting adults with some college credit. Because the workforce system serves unemployed and dislocated workers, it is an excellent place to identify adults who would improve their job prospects by completing a degree or credential. During its work in four states—Indiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania—the Rutgers School of Labor and Management’s workforce-based adult college completion projects assisted 750 adults with some college credit in returning to college and also identified a number of important steps states need to take in order to use the workforce system in this way. Among these promising practices are ensuring that degree-completion programs are included in state workforce Eligible Training Provider Lists; training workforce professionals about the value of a college degree in obtaining a job; standardizing

intake and counseling processes to ensure that eligible clients know that degree completion is an option; and building stronger partnerships between workforce one-stops and nearby community colleges (Haviland et al 2014).

Conclusion

As of 2014, campus-based project staff at Lumina-funded adult college completion projects reported seeing improved institutional outcomes, with almost one-third indicating that they had seen improvement to a great extent in areas such as awareness of adult student needs among campus leaders (31%), institutional commitment to serving adults (30%), and new or expanded partnerships with organizations outside the institution aimed at assisting adults with some college credit (28%). However, these individuals also pointed to some areas where there has been less change, including additional resources directed to programs serving adult students with some college credit, greater awareness of the needs of adult students among faculty, and institutional policy changes that benefit adult students with some college credit (Erisman and Steele 2014b).

These findings are echoed in the results of a survey conducted in 2014 by Higher Ed Insight with a broad range of national, state, and institutional adult college completion stakeholders (*see Figure 10*). In this survey, more than a third of respondents indicated that, over the last few years, they have seen considerable improvements in awareness of the needs of returning adult students among state and/or federal policymakers (43%), awareness of the needs of returning adult students among postsecondary administrators (40%), and collaboration among organizations working to support returning adult students (35%). However, these stakeholders also noted concerns about faculty awareness of adult student needs and the availability of resources to serve these students (Erisman and Steele 2014a).

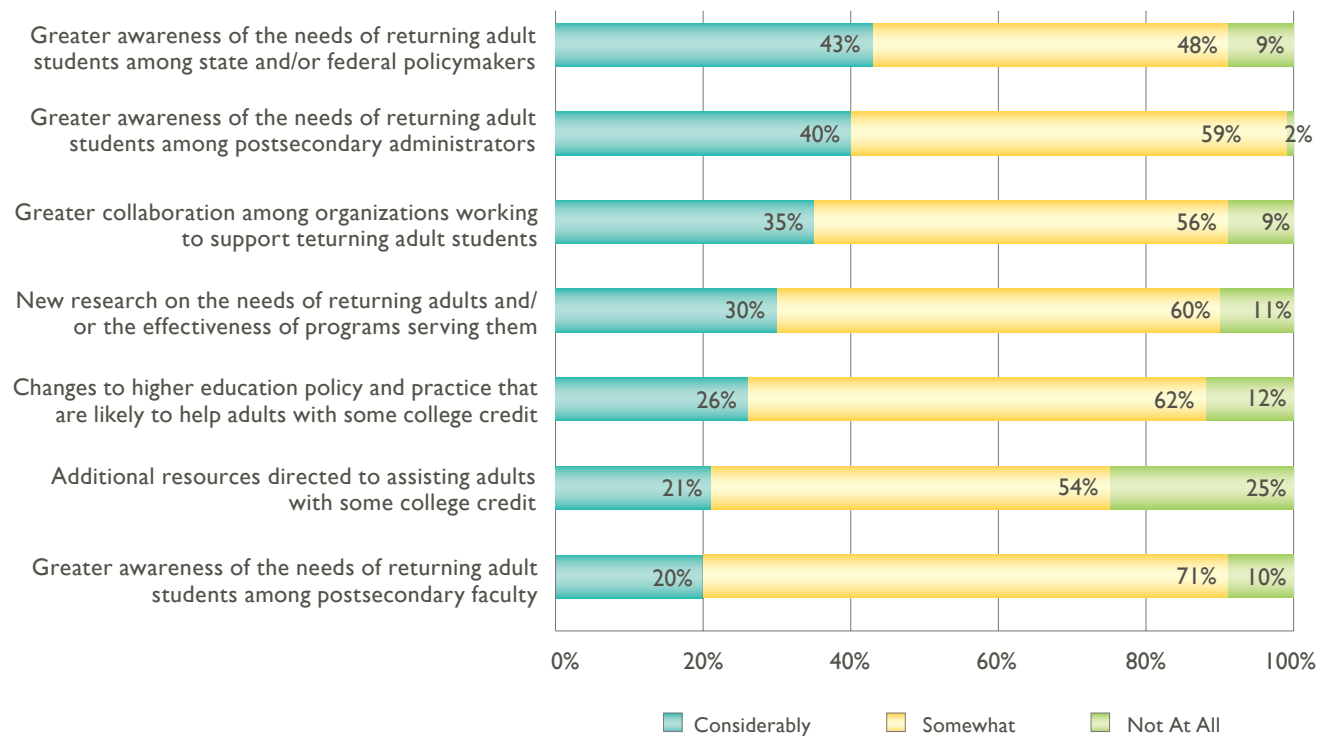


The same conversation has also been occurring more broadly in the higher education community. Panels and interviews with higher education leaders over the past few years have led to many of the same conclusions reached in this report. In a nutshell, returning adult students, like nontraditional students more generally, need a higher education system that is more affordable, flexible, and customer-service oriented than it has been in the past. To serve these students, higher education must promote innovative ways to deliver course content and assess student outcomes, develop more effective student support systems, and forge closer connections to workforce and industry (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance 2012; InsideTrack 2012b). As Louis Soares noted in his influential paper on post-traditional students:

In a successful 21st century, the literature to be written must point to a bottom-up entrepreneurship, in which, postsecondary education leaders transformed institutional, instructional, credentialing, and financing models based on the learning needs of post-traditional learners. These new forms will produce more learning for students, rewrite public policy, and create an era of post-traditional learning aligned with a knowledge society and innovation economy (Soares 2013).

The challenge is how to tackle such profound change in a complex and tradition-bound system such as higher education. Respondents to Higher Ed Insight’s 2014 adult college completion stakeholder survey suggested a number of possible strategies.

FIGURE 10: Perceived Improvements in Institutional Outcome Among Adult College Completion Stakeholders, 2014



Source: Erisman, Wendy, and Patricia Steele. 2014. *Making a College Degree Convenient, Accessible and Low-Cost: Stakeholder Perspectives on Adult College Completion Efforts*. Washington, DC: Higher Ed Insight.

Four key areas—working to influence state and federal policy pertaining to adult college completion, sharing lessons learned about adult college completion, funding new institutional and/or state-level projects that support returning adult students, and funding efforts to bring existing adult college completion projects to scale—were considered very important by most respondents (Erisman and Steele 2014a). Postsecondary institutions undoubtedly work within, and are constrained by, state and national policies around student-level data collection and tracking, financial aid, transfer of credit, and innovation in academic programming, and therefore policy change must play a key role in any systemic change effort. At a basic level, however, to promote change within postsecondary institutions, it will be necessary to replicate and/or scale already successful projects such as some of those discussed above.

It is important to note that measuring success has not been an easy task for adult college completion projects. Postsecondary institutions are generally not required to track outcomes for non-first-time students. Moreover, looking at several projects that have tracked such outcomes, it is not clear what should be defined as success—what percentage of students re-enrolling and completing credentials and what impact different credentials have on workforce opportunities for these individuals is large enough. We also don't know very much about which targeted approaches to degree completion are the most cost effective, as many of the intensive advising approaches used by adult college completion projects are unlikely to be scalable without substantial reallocation of funds.

While replicating and scaling projects is never easy, successful examples do exist. In particular, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has demonstrated considerable potential for scaling with its Plus 50 Completion project, aimed at supporting older adults to complete degrees and certificates that will advance their careers. Since 2010, the 17 community colleges in the first cohort of this

program have graduated nearly 8,900 adults age 50 and older, with 61% earning non-credit certificates, 15% earning credit certificates, and 24% earning associate's degrees (Learning for Action 2014). In 2013, AACC expanded the program to 100 more colleges in its Plus 50 Encore Completion program, with a commitment to institutionalizing the lessons learned through earlier Plus 50 work in community colleges nationwide. Rather than directly funding these new colleges, AACC is supporting them by providing them with a model development and evaluation toolkit that includes resources and rubrics for each step of the implementation process. Participating colleges receive support and mentoring from peer colleges, and the initiative as a whole has a strong commitment to sharing effective practices across sites (Learning for Action 2015).

As this report demonstrates, we know quite a bit more about the specific population of adults with some college credit than we did five years ago, and this new information should be helpful to policymakers and higher education leaders as they plan for a future where adults make up an even larger portion of the postsecondary student body. However, much of what we know about adult learners in general is not new. The problem is that this knowledge has not been acted on by nearly enough colleges and universities. Higher education faces a new reality, one where many students are not recent high school graduates and most classes are not lectures or even in-person discussions or labs. As postsecondary learning becomes less connected to the constraints of time and space that have previously limited it, colleges must adapt, and in doing so, are likely to find that they are much better able to serve the adults for whom a chance, or a second chance, at higher education can make such a difference in their lives.



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Appendix A

Lumina-Funded Adult College Completion Projects

In 2010, Lumina Foundation funded 10 large-scale projects aimed at serving adult students with some college credit but no degree. Together with seven Lumina-funded projects working in areas related to adult college completion, these grantees were provided financial support and the opportunity to form the core of a new Adult College Completion Network, funded by Lumina and managed by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. To evaluate the effectiveness of this adult college completion work, Lumina contracted with Higher Ed Insight to identify lessons learned across all of the funded projects. Much of the preceding report is based on data collected from interviews, site visits, and surveys conducted by Higher Ed Insight over the last several years as part of this evaluation.

Metro Region Core Projects

Degrees at Work (Greater Louisville Inc.): Assists Louisville, KY, employers in identifying and supporting employees with some college credit who could benefit from completing a degree and promotes the adoption of education-friendly programs, policies, and practices among Louisville employers.

Plus 50 Completion Strategy (American Association of Community Colleges): Works with community colleges to develop programs that help workers over age 50 who are still struggling to recover from the economic recession complete degrees, certificates, or not-for-credit credentials in high-value occupations.

The Graduate! Network: Works to increase the number of adults with college degrees in specific metro regions through free advising, guidance, coaching and supports to adults who seek to return to college. Seeks to expand the Graduate! approach beyond the original Graduate! Philadelphia program to additional metropolitan areas.

Metro Region Affiliated Projects

Community College/Career Collaboration (Goodwill Industries International): Increases college and career success for low-income individuals lacking a college or career credential by teaming educational and workforce systems to provide easy access to education, job-specific training and support services.

Municipal Leadership for Postsecondary Success (National League of Cities): Engages with municipal leaders and stimulates and strengthens local collaborations to increase the rate and shorten the time within which residents finish higher education with a degree, certificate, or other credential.

Talent Dividend Prize and Network (CEOs for Cities): Offers a \$1 million prize for the city that exhibited the greatest increase in the number of postsecondary degrees granted over a three-year period. Brings together cross-sector teams from participating cities for peer-to-peer conversations on strategies, successes, and challenges in increasing college attainment rates.



State or Higher Education System Core Projects

Adult College Completion Project (Rutgers School of Labor and Management Relations/National Association of Workforce Boards): Seeks to institutionalize adult degree completion as an option through the workforce development system in four states, Indiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania.

Adult Completion Policy Project (Jobs for the Future): Works to advance a supportive state policy framework in Kentucky, Michigan, and Kansas in order to increase adult completion rates in occupational-technical credential programs.

Adult Degree Completion Program (Ivy Tech Community College): Seeks to re-engage adults who have left Ivy Tech Community College without completing a degree by employing a targeted marketing approach and advising by specially trained staff to assist these students.

DegreeNow (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission): Creates an integrated statewide adult degree completion program, including improved recruitment of adult students and enhanced academic affairs and student services capacity to serve adult learners at state colleges and universities.

Graduate Minnesota (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities): Conducts a statewide outreach campaign to encourage students who have earned some college credits to complete their associate or bachelor's degrees and tries to expand postsecondary institutions' capacity to offer prior learning assessments and academic programs appropriate to returning students.

Prior Learning Assessment Expansion Initiative (University of Wisconsin System): Aims to expand the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) opportunities available to returning non-traditional adult students by establishing policies that support system-wide PLA implementation at UW System institutions.

State or Higher Education System Affiliated Projects

Deployment of the NAM-Endorsed Manufacturing Skills Certification System (Manufacturing Institute): Supports efforts in 13 states to align stackable industry-recognized skills certifications in Advanced Manufacturing with educational degree pathways that span high school to community colleges to four-year institutions.

Project Win-Win (Institute for Higher Education Policy): Works with colleges and universities to identify former students whose records qualify them for a degree and award those degrees retroactively as well as to identify former students who are short of a degree by no more than nine to 12 credits, find them, and seek to bring them back to complete the degree.

SUNY Works (The State University of New York): Implements a model of cooperative and experiential education across SUNY colleges and universities in collaboration with business/industry and regional economic councils.



National Projects

[TheAdultLearner.org](https://theadultlearner.org) (Southern Regional Education Board): Establishes an online portal, designed to be a gateway to a variety of online and blended learning degree completion programs and services designed for adults who started, but never completed, their degree programs.

[LearningCounts.org](https://learningcounts.org) (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning): Provides advising, assesses learning from life experience, determines whether it is college-level, and makes credit recommendations and serves as a comprehensive PLA resource for individual learners, postsecondary institutions, employers, and workforce systems.

Appendix B

Special Adult Student Populations

Certain adult student populations are of special interest to adult college completion programs and/or have special needs that such programs must take into consideration. While the two populations discussed below are not the only adult student populations that can be served by such programs, they are the ones that were most commonly cited by grantees during Higher Ed Insight's evaluation of Lumina Foundation's adult college completion efforts. Both of these groups have also been the target of considerable research and program investment over the last several years.

Older Adults

As a result of increasing life expectancy and less secure retirement plans, some older adults are finding that they need or want to work longer than they had anticipated. In many cases, these individuals are working in industries that are changing rapidly and may not have the technological skills to find a new job or meet the changing needs of their current positions. In addition, older adults working in jobs that require physical strength or endurance may no longer have the capacity for that work (Miller, Simon, and Schneider 2011). Further education can be of considerable value to these older adults, especially those who have already earned some college credit. Adults age 50 and older make up about one-fifth of the current population of individuals with some college credit but no degree and so include quite a few individuals who may need further training in order to remain employed (Shapiro et al 2014).

However, postsecondary institutions are often not equipped to meet their educational needs of older adults or advise them about career choices (Miller, Simon, and Schneider 2011). In their early work with community colleges serving older adults, for example, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) found that programs aimed at older adults tended to be designed for personal enrichment rather than workforce training (Learning for Action 2015). This mismatch may be one of the reasons why, in the Grad TX surveys, adults ages 50 and older made up a much larger percentage of potential returning students (35%) than actual returning students (18%) (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

AACC's Plus 50 initiative has identified a number of factors that make returning to college more challenging for older adults. These include age discrimination in the workforce; financial challenges, particularly among those who lost much of their retirement savings during the recent recession; a lack of experience with technology; and anxiety about returning to school and/or seeking a new career later in life (Learning for Action 2015). These concerns were mirrored in focus groups conducted as part of the Grad TX evaluation, in which participants expressed particular reservations about attending school with much younger fellow students (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

A number of recent initiatives have worked to address the unique challenges of this group of potential students. The Council for Adult and Experiential Education (CAEL) has conducted an effort to identify key industries in selected areas of the country; document career pathways and training appropriate for older workers; train career counselors to work more effectively with older clients; and engage with employers to promote hiring of older adults. As a result of this project, CAEL has

identified a number of factors that are characteristic of career pathways suited to older workers. These include manageable physical requirements, ease of entry into the industry, opportunities for flexibility in scheduling, and the availability of low-cost, short-term training programs (Miller, Simon, and Schneider 2011). A more recent program sponsored by the AARP Foundation, Back to Work 50+, is attempting to build a pipeline of training programs and employers in specific local areas who will work together to offer educational and employment opportunities for unemployed or underemployed older adults (AARP Foundation n.d.).

Since 2008, AACC's Plus 50 initiative has worked with member community colleges to expand workforce offerings and support services for older adults. Since receiving a Lumina grant in 2010, the program has focused, in particular, on helping older adults complete degrees and certificates with value in the labor market. The Plus 50 program has been a notable success among the various Lumina-funded adult college completion efforts. Since 2008, the number of participating community colleges grew from 13 to 88. Those colleges saw a 216% increase in students age 50 and older and a 463% increase in older adults enrolled in workforce programs (Learning for Action 2015). Moreover, since 2010, the 17 colleges in the initial cohort have graduated nearly 8,900 adults age 50 and older, with 61% earning non-credit certificates, 15% earning credit certificates, and 24% earning associate's degrees (Learning for Action 2014).

The key lessons learned from AACC's Plus 50 work include the recognition that community colleges must do more to reach out to older students through targeted informational materials and media stories as well as through partnerships with local agencies that serve this population. Plus 50 colleges have found it valuable to conduct separate orientation sessions for older students, and some even offer free workshops to help older students become acclimated to college before enrolling. The program has learned that older students prefer flexible course scheduling and want to complete a credential as quickly as possible but may need extra support in learning to use computer technology and in brushing up English and/or math skills. Community colleges in the AACC Plus 50 program have also improved student outcomes by offering training for faculty and advisors on working with this population, and many of the colleges have an advisor dedicated to working with older adults (Learning for Action 2015).

Veterans and Active Military

The passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Assistance Act of 2008, together with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has led to a considerable increase in active military personnel and veterans seeking postsecondary education. Between 2009 and 2013, nearly 1.2 veterans and another 275,000 active military members applied for benefits under this bill (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2015), and in the 2012-13 academic year, colleges and universities reported enrolling almost 850,000 military personnel, veterans, and dependents (Queen, Lewis, and Ralph 2014). Access to postsecondary education is of considerable consequence to veterans. Recent research indicates that more than half of all veterans (53%) will be unemployed for a time after leaving the military. Veterans under age 35 are most likely to be unemployed and face unemployment rates higher than for civilians in the same age group (11% versus 8%). Veterans without postsecondary credentials are also more likely to be unemployed than comparable civilians (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2015).



Veterans and active military personnel make up an important component of the adult learner population. Nearly all are age 25 or older (94%), with more than half of these individuals (52%) age 25 to 35, another third age 35 to 50, and 9% age 50 and older. Moreover, 81% of veterans and active military personnel applying for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are male, unlike civilian adult students who are more likely to be female. Most students using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are doing so to earn an undergraduate degree or certificate. Only 11% of these individuals are pursuing a graduate degree. The remainder are seeking bachelor's degrees (35%), associate's degrees (35%), or certificates (9%) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2015).

Students who are military veterans face most of the challenges experienced by adult students more generally and, like other nontraditional students, tend to take longer to complete a postsecondary credential. Although veterans' education benefits are superior to those available to most civilian students, veterans must still find ways to balance school with other adult responsibilities and become accustomed to being a student after some time away from the classroom. Veterans also face challenges not typical among other adult student groups. Many suffer from physical or mental disabilities as a result of their military service, and some of those disabilities, particularly traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, offer particular challenges in educational settings (Student Veterans of America 2014).

Like all adult students, veterans entering postsecondary education can benefit considerably from good advising. Many veterans have not spent much time in a civilian career and need assistance in understanding the labor market value and career paths associated with different postsecondary credentials. Because Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are limited to three years, student veterans run the risk of using up their benefits before completing a credential if they do not receive adequate advising about educational and career choices. One way in which veterans can shorten the path to a degree or certificate is to obtain college credit for military training and experience. However, not all veterans are aware of this option or run into roadblocks when they try to gain credit for prior learning (CAEL 2013).

Research into the needs of student veterans has identified a number of effective practices to support this student population. Because student veterans have different information needs than civilian students, particularly regarding Veterans Administration benefits, credit for prior learning, and disability services, experts recommend providing veteran-specific outreach materials and identifying an office or individual to serve as the primary contact for student veterans. Veterans may find themselves isolated on college campuses, so student veterans' organizations and peer mentoring are valuable opportunities. Another important practice is to offer training on student veterans' needs and concerns to faculty and staff members (CAEL 2012).

Studies show that postsecondary institutions are beginning to engage in the practices described above. A 2012 study showed that institutions offering programs and services specifically for veterans and military personnel increased to 62% versus 57% in 2009, and institutions planning to offer such programs increased to 71% from 57% in the same time period (McBain et al 2012). During the 2012-13 academic year, among colleges and universities that enrolled active military personnel and/or veterans, 79% offered veteran-specific informational materials and 82% had a designated point of contact for this student population. Student organizations and peer mentoring were less common (36%



and 12%), while 21% of institutions offer faculty and/or staff training on the transition from military to civilian life and mental health issues for veterans (Queen, Lewis, and Ralph 2014).

Among the top concerns for veteran and active military students are earning credit for military training and qualifying for in-state tuition. Also important are policies that allow for tuition refunds and provide opportunities to complete courses when students have to drop out due to a deployment (CAEL 2012; McBain et al 2012). During the 2012-13 academic year, 76% of institutions that enroll military students offered academic credit for military training (Queen, Lewis, and Ralph 2014), while as of 2012, 82% of institutions had policies about tuition refunds for deployed military students (McBain et al 2012).

The situation regarding in-state tuition is a bit more complex. As of 2012-13, 96% of institutions reported that veterans who had designated the state as their home of record during their military service received in-state tuition; 76% reported the same for veterans who resided in the state prior to enlisting and then returned to that state; and 52% reported that veterans residing in the state could receive in-state tuition regardless of length of residency (Queen, Lewis, and Ralph 2014). However, as of July 2015, under the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, all states will be required to offer in-state tuition rates to veterans and their dependents who live in that state and are using veterans' education benefits (Fulton and Sponsler 2015).

Concern for active military and veteran students has led states to take action to ensure that they are adequately supported. Reports on recent legislative actions show states passing bills that require or encourage colleges to award academic credit for military training, offer in-state tuition to veterans who would not otherwise qualify, and mandate tuition refunds and other policies to assist deployed military students (Pingel 2014; Higher Ed Insight 2013). Some states have taken these policies a step further. In Minnesota, for example, veterans considering enrolling in postsecondary education can obtain information through the website MyMilitaryEducation.org or through regional veterans' higher education coordinator who are available by phone, email, or internet chat. The state's Veterans' Education Transfer System (VETS) is an online tool veterans can use to determine how their military training can be applied as academic credit at various state colleges and universities and what procedures they need to follow to have their training evaluated.



Higher Ed Insight is a research and evaluation consulting firm based in Washington, DC with a mission to improve college access and success for underrepresented populations in U.S. higher education. For more information, visit <http://www.higheredinsight.com>.

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