



# ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE ADULT LEARNER

*Barriers and Opportunities for the Non-Traditional  
Student*

# What is a Non-Traditional Student?

- The definition of a non-traditional student can vary, but according to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) a non-traditional student is one who:
  - ▣ Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
  - ▣ Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year;
  - ▣ Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
  - ▣ Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
  - ▣ Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
  - ▣ Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or
  - ▣ Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

# Non-Traditional Students

- As more non-traditional students make the decision to start or return to postsecondary education, it is important that the unique challenges faced by these students are addressed.
- It is estimated that the U.S. must produce 64 million degrees between 2005 and 2025 to remain competitive with leading nations and meet labor force needs. At the current degree-awarding rate, a gap of 16 million degrees is anticipated.<sup>4</sup>



# Challenges Faced by the Non-Traditional Student



- ❑ Financial Challenges
- ❑ Logistical Challenges
- ❑ Educational Challenges



# Challenges Faced by the Non-Traditional Student

- Financial Challenges
  - Most non-traditional students must balance the cost of education with other financial obligations, including basic living expenses.
  - Financial aid programs typically are only available for full-time students, while a non-traditional student often works full-time and goes to school part-time, and therefore unable to meet the financial aid requirements.
  - Community colleges, on campus childcare, and scholarships geared towards non-traditional students can have a positive impact on these challenges.



# Challenges Faced by the Non-Traditional Student

- Logistical Challenges
  - ▣ Simply getting to a class can be a challenge for many non-traditional students. The responsibilities of work, dependents, and others present a unique challenge to the non-traditional student.
  - ▣ Distance learning, modified class schedules, and flexible professor office hours can be a great tool in overcoming some of these barriers.



# Challenges Faced by the Non-Traditional Student

## □ Educational Challenges

- Starting or returning to postsecondary education can be a daunting prospect to a non-traditional student who may not have encountered a classroom setting in years.
- Some adult learners face deficiencies in academic preparedness.
- For non-traditional students facing these issues, community colleges are often a good alternative because they usually offer more levels of course work than four-year institutions.



# Fast Facts: Adult Learners

- Between 2005 and 2025, one-third of states are projected to experience no growth or a decline in the number of adults ages 25-44, which increases pressure on these states to increase college participation and completion among other segments of the population.<sup>5</sup>
- Forty percent of the nation's 16 million college and university students are 25 years of age or older.<sup>3</sup>
- Non-traditional students are more likely than traditional students to participate in distance education and to be in programs available entirely through distance education.<sup>3</sup>



# Fast Facts: Adult Education, the Workforce and Economic Competitiveness

- The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that between 2004 and 2014, 24 of the 30 fastest-growing occupations in the U.S. will be filled by people who have a postsecondary education or training credentials...and trends in the workplace suggest that employers' demand for skilled U.S. workers will continue to grow over time.<sup>5</sup>
- In the U.S., more than 59 million people, or 30 percent of the adult population, are untouched by postsecondary education. In 35 states, more than 60 percent of the population do not have an associate's degree or higher.<sup>3</sup>



# Fast Facts: Benefits

- Strategies that improve the postsecondary education of working adults can help states increase the prosperity of working families... [as] U.S. employers are now paying college-educated workers 75 percent more than they are paying workers with only a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup>
- Median earnings for those with some college, but no degree, were 18 percent higher than those for high school graduates. Adults with associate degrees earned 29 percent more than high school graduates.<sup>1</sup>
- Those with master's degrees earned almost twice as much, and those with professional degrees earned over three times as much per year as high school graduates.<sup>1</sup>



# Fast Facts: Cost and Affordability

- For the 2009-10 academic year, average tuition and fees range from \$2,544 at public two-year colleges and \$5,930 at public baccalaureate colleges, to \$32,349 at private doctorate-granting universities.<sup>2</sup>
- Tuition is not the biggest expense for working adults seeking postsecondary credentials; the biggest expenses are living expenses for themselves and often their families, while they are in school.<sup>5</sup>
- Seventeen states do not provide any need-based aid to part-time students, and another eighteen states devote less than 10 percent of need-based aid funds to part-timers.<sup>3</sup>



# State Policy Actions: Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs)

- Review current practices
  - ▣ States need clear policies for the awarding of college credit for knowledge demonstrated both inside and outside of postsecondary education instruction
- Have state financial aid policies which support student use of Prior Learning Assessments
- Accepted methods should be used to award credits for equivalent knowledge demonstrated through:
  - ▣ courses taken at other in-state or out-of-state postsecondary institutions
  - ▣ Professional experiences
  - ▣ Knowledge demonstrated through evaluations/examinations



# State Policy Actions: Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs)

- ❑ Convene working groups to educate employers, employees, and policymakers of the advantages of LiLAs
- ❑ Move toward the enactment of LiLA policies to leverage state, employer, and employee funds to support adult learners in saving for postsecondary education
- ❑ Identify specific workforce needs in high priority sectors and develop pilot LiLA programs targeting these sectors, taking all opportunities to connect LiLAs with existing saving and funding programs
- ❑ Work with federal policymakers to ensure continuity between state and federal LiLA policies.



# State Policy Actions: Recruitment & Retention of Adult Learners

- ❑ In order to remain competitive in tomorrow's global economy, the U.S. must produce 16 million more college degrees by 2025.<sup>4</sup>
- ❑ To meet this need, states should design and implement public awareness campaigns aimed at both students and employers.
- ❑ To recruit and retain adult learners, stakeholders should ensure institutions create programs that take into consideration individual circumstances and are consistent with high academic standards.



# State Policy Actions: Collaboration of Stakeholders

- A myriad of stakeholders should be engaged in the expansion of educational programs, including: adult learners, financial aid organizations, the media, advocacy organizations, accreditation bodies, higher education institutions, state education coordinating boards, employers, and the entire business community.
- Stakeholders should collaborate to advance policies and programs that support adult learners, such as: hosting a statewide summit, ensuring P-20 initiatives include the recruitment of adults, and creating a state strategic plan for adult learning and workforce development.



# State Policy Actions:

## State Financial Aid Policies

- ❑ Make appropriate changes to financial aid policies that reduce procedural barriers and support adult learners in achieving educational goals
- ❑ Creatively use resources to fill gaps in federal aid programs; for example, expanding support for part-time and certificate students, or providing aid to students in non-credit courses and programs
- ❑ Encourage higher education institutions to offer alternate payment plans, such as installment or deferred payment plans and help adult learners identify other sources of funding, such as employer assistance programs



# State Policy Actions:

## Provide Enhanced Support for Adult Learners

- Encourage higher education institutions to provide flexible enrollment programs, registration, and classroom attendance and participation, such as online or distance learning
- Assist institutions in providing services that recognize and alleviate barriers faced by adult learners, such as child care, adult-centered orientation, transition from workforce to classroom, or integration from military life to civilian life for veterans returning to school



# Additional Resources

- [Lumina Foundation](#)
- [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning \(CAEL\)](#)
- [Excelencia in Education](#)
- [Education Commission of the States](#)



# Works Cited

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2. The College Board, “Education Pays,” Trends in College Pricing Series 2009
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5. National Governors Association, NGA Center for Best Practices, “The Pathways to Advancement Project: How States Can Expand Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Working Adults,” 2009



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