

# Moving Up:

**An Action Plan to  
Improve Economic Opportunity  
for Kentucky Adults  
Through Lifelong Learning**



Prepared by the Kentucky Council  
on Postsecondary Education

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## Executive Summary

The need to engage substantially more adults in postsecondary education and training is essential to creating greater economic opportunity and social mobility for more Kentuckians. Total undergraduate adult enrollment has decreased 50% since the 2012-13 academic year. Declining birth rates during the Great Recession and a drop in immediate college-going rates among traditional-age students mean there are fewer people in the postsecondary pipeline.

Kentucky ranks 35th in the nation in the educational attainment level of its workforce. Furthermore, at 56.3%, Kentucky has one of the lowest workforce participation rates in the nation. This depresses economic development, limits knowledge-economy job creation, curbs social and economic mobility and reduces enthusiasm for credential attainment beyond high school.

To increase prosperity and well-being for our state and its people, the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) and Kentucky's postsecondary community are resolved to increase postsecondary opportunities for undereducated adults in both the short and long term. "Higher Education Matters: A Statewide Strategic Agenda for Kentucky Postsecondary Education" calls on the state to "work with education providers to limit barriers to enrollment and completion for adult learners and other students balancing the competing demands of work, life, family and school" (Objective 5, Strategy d).

In fall 2021, CPE assembled a team of state and national experts to recommend action steps to advance this important work. The action steps fall under three main headings (Accessibility, Institutional Change, and Partnerships) and are categorized as occurring now (in progress or within six months), next (to be undertaken over the next 12-18 months), and later (action steps needing further collaboration and refinement, occurring in the next two to three years).

The report concludes with data analyses to determine a priority population for future action. This priority population:

- is between the ages of 25-39, when adults typically are most interested in career advancement or retraining.
- is not currently enrolled in postsecondary education.
- has completed high school or some college but no credential. (Adults with no high school diploma have a longer onramp to postsecondary education, and adults pursuing a second credential do not move the needle on statewide educational attainment.)
- is living below 200% of the national poverty level, making less than a living wage.



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...the need to engage substantially more adults in postsecondary education & training is essential to creating greater economic opportunity and social mobility for more Kentuckians.

## Introduction

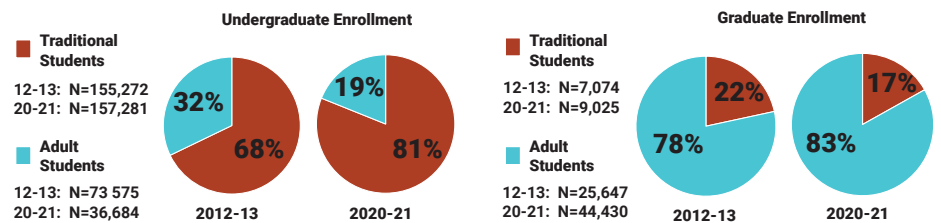
### The Current Landscape of Adult Postsecondary Participation in Kentucky

In 2015, Kentucky established an ambitious educational attainment goal: for 60% of working-age residents (ages 25-64) to earn a postsecondary certificate or degree by the year 2030. The Commonwealth has made great strides in the past decade, increasing educational attainment by nearly 19 percentage points. Only Arizona and Louisiana have made more progress than the Commonwealth during this time frame.

Nevertheless, as we close in on 2030, the need to engage substantially more adults in postsecondary education and training is essential to creating greater economic opportunity and social mobility for more Kentuckians. While campus enrollments are just now beginning to stabilize after the global pandemic, the state's nearly decade-long slide in adult postsecondary participation has been steady. Total undergraduate adult enrollment has decreased 50% since the 2012-13 academic year.

This situation is compounded by a drop in the immediate college-going rate of high school graduates (which fell from 59% in 2015-16 to 54% in 2019-20). Coupled with declining birth rates during the Great Recession, these circumstances mean there are fewer traditional-age students in the postsecondary pipeline. We must penetrate the untapped adult market if we hope to reach our educational attainment goal and improve the lives of our citizens.

#### Total Enrollment in Kentucky Postsecondary Education, 2012-13 to 2020-21



#### Undergraduate Adult Enrollment by Sector, 2012-13 to 2020-21

	AY 12-13	AY 13-14	AY 14-15	AY 15-16	AY 16-17	AY 17-18	AY 18-19	AY 19-20	AY 20-21
KCTCS	45,812	41,495	37,203	31,643	29,994	28,143	27,367	26,822	22,252
4-Year Public	19,983	19,189	18,293	16,871	15,796	14,351	13,104	11,995	11,522
Private (AIKCU)	6,686	6,330	4,634	4,381	4,113	4,370	4,369	4,497	4,277
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>72,481</b>	<b>67,014</b>	<b>60,130</b>	<b>52,895</b>	<b>49,903</b>	<b>46,864</b>	<b>44,840</b>	<b>43,314</b>	<b>38,051</b>
<b>ANNUAL CHANGE</b>		-10.3%	-12.0%	-5.7%	-6.1%	-4.3%	-3.4%	-12.1%	-5.1%

## Probable Causes of Adult Enrollment Declines

While we can conjecture about the probable causes of adult enrollment declines, they are ultimately difficult to quantify. In the decade following the Great Recession (circa 2010-20), Kentucky's unemployment rate steadily fell from 11% to 4%. Since changes in enrollment are often counter cyclical to economic upswings or downturns, adult postsecondary participation predictably decreased in the recovering labor market. In general, when the economy is good, adult enrollment tapers off; when jobs are scarce, adults seek career advancement or retraining in greater numbers.

Unfortunately, this trend did not hold when the state's unemployment rate spiked at 16.5% amid COVID-related closures. Beginning in 2020, adults found themselves overwhelmed by stay-at-home mandates, financial insecurity, furloughs and closures, increased childcare responsibilities, remote work and school, anxiety over elderly and immunocompromised individuals, and other unprecedented, volatile events that greatly reduced their bandwidth for postsecondary study.

Of course, COVID is only a recent factor in Kentucky's sustained adult enrollment decline. For several generations, a large portion of undereducated adults (those with a high school diploma or less) have lived below the poverty line; faced food or housing insecurity; endured disabilities, poor health or substance abuse disorders; served prison sentences or dealt with the ramifications of criminal convictions. All of these are barriers to postsecondary enrollment and completion, and unfortunately, many are intensifying at precisely the wrong moment.

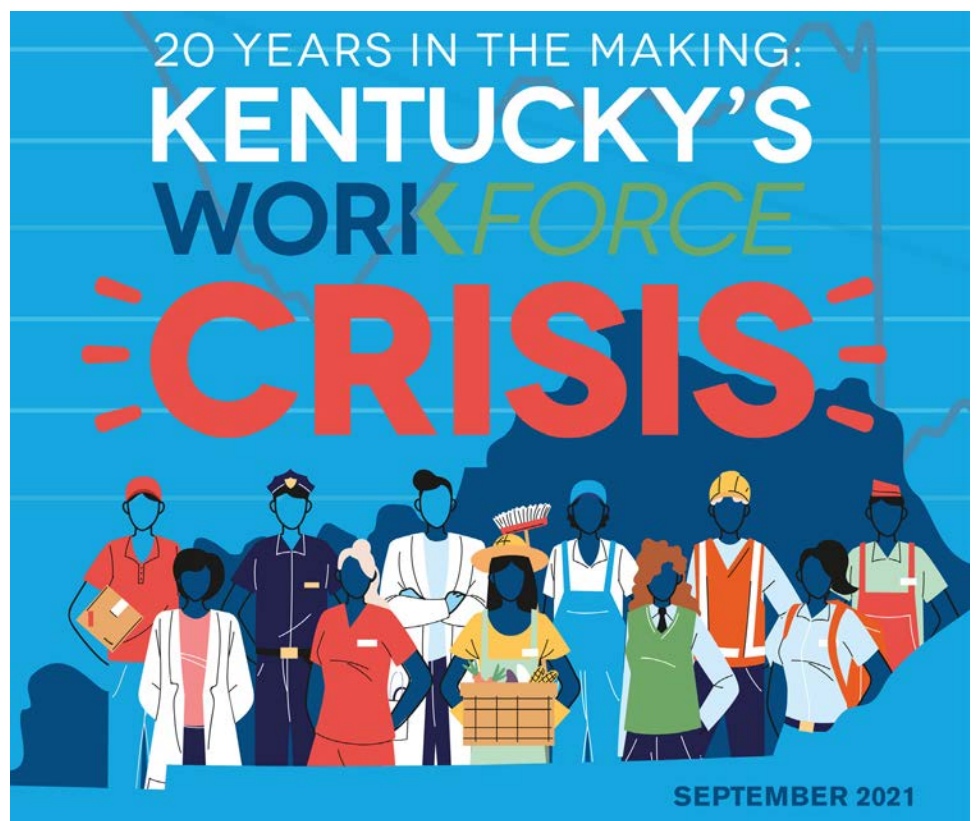
According to the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce's 2021 report, "Twenty Years in the Making: Kentucky's Workforce Crisis," two-thirds to three-quarters of jobs currently unfilled in Kentucky require some level of postsecondary education or training. At 56.3%, Kentucky has one of the lowest workforce participation rates in the nation. This depresses economic development, limits knowledge-economy job creation, curbs social and economic mobility and reduces enthusiasm for credential attainment beyond high school. The Chamber's report provides a timely reminder of the urgency of this work and the need for innovative, effective solutions.

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## The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce Weighs in on the Current Workforce Crisis

Kentucky's adult learner work over the last year has focused on the development of actions and strategies to streamline pathways to and through postsecondary education and training to improve opportunity for Kentucky adults, particularly those who are unemployed or struggling in low-pay, dead-end jobs.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with KCTCS, released an influential report in 2021 zeroing in on the causes and effects of Kentucky's workforce crisis. The report highlights Kentucky's extremely low workforce participation rate (the third lowest in the nation), a key indicator of economic health and a driver of growth and business development. The recent retirement boom, a significant level of substance use disorders, some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, and a growing childcare crisis also contribute to this crisis. But perhaps the biggest issue affecting our workforce participation rate is the skills and education gap in our working-age population. There are too many adults in Kentucky with too little education and training, which is needed to respond to the demands of an increasingly knowledge-based economy.



## Responding to the Crisis

To increase prosperity and well-being for our state and its people, the Council on Postsecondary Education is resolved to increase postsecondary opportunities for undereducated adults in both the short and long term. “Higher Education Matters: A Statewide Strategic Agenda for Kentucky Postsecondary Education” calls on the state to “work with education providers to limit barriers to enrollment and completion for adult learners and other students balancing the competing demands of work, life, family and school” (Objective 5, Strategy d).

From fall 2021 to fall 2022, CPE led a state team to map existing resources and assets in the Commonwealth and outline a statewide policy agenda to increase adult engagement in postsecondary education and training. In conjunction with the multi-state Educational Attainment Academy, coordinated by the Education Strategy Group, the Kentucky team consisted of CPE staff and adult learner experts from Kentucky’s public and private postsecondary institutions. Industry and business interests were represented by the Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board and the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce. Other state and national agencies participating in this work included the Kentucky Office of Adult Education, the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, KYSTATS, and the Graduate! Network, a non-profit organization headquartered in Philadelphia that encourages adults to return to college to finish a credential.

The team leveraged ESG’s “Adult-Ready Playbook” to help frame meeting conversations and organize potential barriers and solutions. The Playbook lays out five key policy and practice areas affecting adult learners: Accessibility, Program Change, Operational Change, Data, and Partnerships. Ultimately, the team collapsed these areas into three categories: Accessibility, Institutional Change (encompassing both program and operational change), and Partnerships.



ESG’s Adult-Ready Playbook sets a framework for how institutions and systems can comprehensively serve post-traditional learners through five priorities for adult-ready transformation – Accessibility, Program Change, Operational Change, Data, and Partnerships. The five priority areas emerged from researching best practices, interviewing leaders, and engaging subject matter experts.

Together, these five priorities and accompanying strategies capture what it will take for institutions and states to serve post-traditional learners effectively.

## Project Goals:

- To develop strategies to engage or re-engage Kentucky adults in the workforce through accessible, high-quality, high-value postsecondary programs.
- To establish a common vision and set of objectives with our state partners to guide this work.
- To create a common understanding of current assets supporting adult learners upon which we can build.
- To recommend actions and next steps for CPE, campuses, the Office of the Governor, the General Assembly, and other state and local partners.



## Building on Past Efforts in Kentucky

Fortunately, Kentucky has a wealth of experience and work to guide us in crafting a statewide policy agenda for adult learners.



### Kentucky Adult Learner Initiative

Funded by Lumina Foundation, KALI sought to align postsecondary policies with the needs of adult learners, with the goal of increasing adult attainment. Working groups addressed three major policy issues: credit for prior learning, flexible academic programming, and financial aid. The groups met monthly throughout 2008 to devise recommendations to make institutions more responsive to the needs of adult learners.



### Degrees When Due

CPE and select Kentucky institutions participated in this national attainment initiative sponsored by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP). This effort involved teams across 23 states at more than 200 colleges and universities eager to reach adult students with some college but no degree. States received technical assistance and support to deploy student-focused, evidence-based, and equity-centered strategies to help adults complete credentials.



### Project Graduate

This initiative helped Kentucky adults with some college but no credential go back to campus to finish what they started. The program provided individualized enrollment and academic support to students with 80 or more credit hours through contact with a designated Project Graduate advisor. Incentives varied from campus to campus; examples include academic or debt forgiveness, application fee waivers, degree audits, flexible course formats/options, and priority enrollment.



### Adult Promise Grant

Awarded by Lumina Foundation, this grant provided funding for a public awareness campaign to publicize the Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship to adults. The scholarship pays for high-demand associate degrees at KCTCS and other eligible providers. CPE worked with KCTCS to build the Work Ready Kentucky website, which enables prospective adult learners to search eligible programs, chat with a representative, and apply for admission and financial aid. Additionally, CPE worked with the Graduate! Network to pilot adult recruitment efforts (ambassador programs) at three KCTCS campuses.



## Recommendations

Through the Attainment Academy, CPE has surveyed existing resources and strengths in the Commonwealth and outlined a set of strategies and a policy agenda that will serve this population better over the coming two to three years. The recommended action steps fall under three main priority areas (Accessibility, Institutional Change, and Partnerships) and are categorized as occurring now (in progress or within six months), next (to be undertaken over the next 12-18 months), and later (action steps needing further collaboration and refinement, occurring in the next two to three years).

Several of these action steps fit easily into more than one area, but for simplicity's sake, we made a subjective decision about the best categorization, which we don't expect to limit these action steps' future effectiveness.

### Priority One: Increasing Accessibility of Higher Education for Adults

Reducing barriers to higher education for adult learners statewide requires innovation at many levels of postsecondary operations. The first set of recommended action steps are strategies that focus on increasing access. In this case, access means helping increase the quality and availability of understandable information about higher education, improving affordability, and facilitating smoother and easier transitions into higher education.

Adult learners typically have been disengaged from higher education for many years. They are more likely to carry debt, possess transfer credit or military experience, work full-time jobs, and be caring for children. Sharing accurate information about the affordability and accessibility of college and university programs is critical in helping these students see postsecondary education as a real possibility. Students' perceptions about the cost and value of higher education, or a lack of confidence about their readiness for college, may prevent them from realizing the positive outcomes associated with enrolling or re-enrolling. Addressing these concerns in a way that is received and understood is a critical first step to re-engagement.

Although many adults have concluded that higher education is not attainable nor designed for them, many institutions have programs and support services customized for the adult market. While there is always room for improvement, Kentucky has several well-designed state and institutional financial aid programs that are well-suited to adult learners and available beyond the traditional age of college attendance. Unfortunately, these are not always well understood by prospective students. Marketing and information-sharing will help raise awareness of available programs that support adults' unique needs. A digital information hub for sharing this type of critical information with potential adult students statewide is currently under development.

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Beyond information-sharing, the action steps recommended in this report will expand creative solutions to address student financial concerns. The launch of Kentucky’s Innovative Scholarship program to serve populations displaced by war or other calamities is an example of a novel program to serve a population not always eligible for state or federal financial aid. These action steps also encourage campuses to adopt and expand innovative pilot projects, such as debt-forgiveness programs modeled on Wayne State’s “Warrior Way Back” initiative.

Finally, the action steps outlined under Accessibility include efforts to better document and understand the adult learner’s lived experience through student journey mapping. Constructing a journey map is a collaborative effort that seeks to visually represent and document a student’s experience with a given part of the student life cycle. The work often focuses on identifying barriers or challenges that are created for students by virtue of moving from one step in a required process to another.

### **Alternatives to Transcript Withholding Increase Access For Adult Learners**

Kentucky’s Attainment Academy Team identified a number of barriers that limit access to postsecondary education for new and returning working-age adults. Among the most challenging is the practice of transcript withholding. Transcripts are withheld by institutions for debts ranging from small outstanding library fines and parking tickets to larger tuition charges.

Wayne State University decided to take a different approach to this issue. Their Warrior Way Back program provides a pathway back into the institution for students carrying balances of less than \$1,500. Students reduce their past-due balances by one-third for each successfully completed semester until the debt is eliminated. Additionally, students are supported with a range of advising and mentoring services to help them succeed in college and complete their programs.



## Action Steps for Accessibility: Now



**Launch a statewide, one-stop student information portal with specific adult-learner information, including available financial aid and other resources, information about postsecondary return-on-investment, tools to direct prospective learners to career-relevant academic programs, and other advising resources.**

- Update the inventory of programs that offer flexible academic programming for inclusion in the one-stop portal.
- Catalog employer-sponsored education benefits and learning opportunities for inclusion in the one-stop portal.



**Expand financial assistance to reduce barriers to entry for returning learners, including debt forgiveness agreements, application and other fee waivers, and emergency aid programs.**

- Investigate incentives for campuses and profile best practices and implementation strategies (CPE).
- Implement strategies that research has proven to be effective in expanding financial accessibility for adults (campuses).



**Launch the Innovative Scholarship Pilot program supporting students from displaced populations resettling in Kentucky. Target eligible adults for funding to help them build language skills and pursue career-focused education and training.**

## Action Steps for Accessibility: Next



**Simplify admissions and intake processes to improve student access and matriculation rates.**

- Phase 1: Launch a pilot project involving CPE and 2-3 community college/university partners to map the student experience during onboarding (admission to matriculation) and identify top barriers for students. Create a plan to expand support to additional institutions across 2023-24, and explore a statewide common application process.

- Phase 2: Undertake work to address themes that surfaced in journey mapping and other top intake/onboarding issues for students. CPE will research and publish findings on pre-matriculation attrition for adult learners, and institutions will align orientation and pre-enrollment services with adult learner needs (hours, modality, etc.), as well as maximizing student transfer credit articulation of previous college credits toward degree progression.



**Partner with a data analytics organization to more precisely identify prospective adult learners in Kentucky for the purposes of targeted information sharing about postsecondary programs and their value in improving social mobility.**



**Using insights from the data analytics organization and additional institutional data, launch a targeted, adult-focused marketing campaign with relevant, regional information about postsecondary opportunities in Kentucky, including available state, federal, and institutional aid programs.**

## Action Steps for Accessibility: Later



**Explore strategies to limit the use of transcript withholding as a debt collection tool, like recent practices out of Minnesota, Illinois, and others.**



**Pursue public and/or philanthropic funding to re-launch and expand Project Graduate. Funding for this program would be used for state coordination, marketing, and campus-based strategies to support returning adult students.**

## Priority Two: Increasing Institutional Innovation to Better Serve Adult Learners

Higher education programs today are mostly designed around the needs, schedules, and resources of traditional-age students entering directly from high school. The structure of programs and support services create logistical and administrative barriers for adult learners who often enroll part-time and balance many other commitments. Adult learners need more flexibility and options from higher education institutions.

The action steps identified in this report suggest two levels at which change can occur: 1) at the state level, which focuses on information-sharing and community building within the higher education community that serves adult learners, and 2) at the institutional level, where innovations and changes in practice need to be implemented to affect the student experience. Institutional innovation should prioritize flexible academic programs and support services, considering everything from course meeting times and modalities, the availability of staff outside of business hours, and the consistency of rules and processes among student support service offices.

Credit for prior learning is a key strategy by which institutions offer students the opportunity to gain academic credit for work, military, or other previous experience outside of a traditional higher education setting. Adult learners may lack formal education in a certain field but have amassed years of work experience that may be equivalent to academic credit. The various methods of documenting credit for prior learning (such as CLEP, DANTES, challenge exams, evaluation of non-college training or education programs, and portfolio construction and review) seek to articulate work and military experience to college credit to help students bypass curricular requirements they may have already mastered.

Awarding credit for prior learning can help shorten time to degree for adult students and reduce frustration with academic programs requiring them to rehash concepts they've already mastered. Nevertheless, students engage with CPL programs at low rates. The recommended action steps for CPL seek to expand the prevalence and effectiveness of this practice across Kentucky. There is particular focus on articulating military experience to postsecondary credit to ensure transparency and predictability for service members and veterans going back to school. This work will bring Kentucky in line with other progressive states that have aligned statewide credit for well-documented military training and experience.

Another action step focuses on identifying gaps in programs serving students whose basic needs are not being met. According to the ECMC Foundation, "access to basic needs, such as food, housing, childcare, mental health, financial assistance, and transportation, is critical for ensuring strong academic performance, increasing persistence and graduation, and improving well-being among students enrolled in postsecondary education." Because students often have needs in one of these areas, institutional programming to meet basic needs is growing.

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**Adult learners need more flexibility & options from higher education institutions.**

This programming, however, still falls short of addressing the needs of many students. Services for this population lie at the intersection of public benefits access and institutional support; therefore, addressing basic needs requires intentional braiding of federal and state resources.

Beginning in summer 2022, a cohort of campus teams began a study of their programs supporting student food and housing insecurity, as well as emergency financial aid availability, with the goal of understanding gaps in service, opportunity for growth, and impacts on the student experience. This study, supported by Lumina Foundation, will be facilitated by the Kentucky Student Success Collaborative and will inform larger, continued conversations around how to expand and sustain programs that address student basic needs.

A critical role that CPE and other state agencies can play is to act as a convener and facilitator of change. Effective communities of practice (groups of people who share common concerns coming together to improve a process or solve a problem) will support moving from effective institutional change at a single institution to scaled success in key areas that impact adult learners across the state. There is a strong history of higher education institutions across Kentucky coming together in this way to focus on adult learners. The continued collaborative work called for in this agenda will build on existing communities and spaces to bring institutions together to increase collective impact.

## Examples of Innovative Adult Learner Practices in Kentucky



**The University of Louisville** offers a B.S. in organizational leadership and learning targeting adults with previous work experience. The innovative LEAD 300 requirement guides students through the creation of a portfolio to document learning from work, military, or other life experience. Adults can receive up to 48 hours of college credit from this portfolio assessment.



**Northern Kentucky University's** Project Graduate initiative re-enrolls students with at least 80 credit hours who have been out of postsecondary education two or more years. It offers incentives and support to help adults address potential barriers to degree completion. In 2019-20, with partial funding from CPE, the program enrolled 500 students, 100 of which finished degrees.

## Action Steps for Institutional Change: Now



Convene enrollment administrators, adult learner champions, and other relevant stakeholders to share effective practices and information about credit for prior learning (CPL) and determine a scope of work for its expansion.



Identify gaps in and expand support for institutional programs that help students meet basic needs like food, housing, and transportation.

## Action Steps for Institutional Change: Next



Develop a statewide policy on credit for prior learning, beginning with the transfer of military credit and CPL for military experience. Transition CPE's "Guiding Principles for the Award of Military Credit" into required action by all institutions. Explore the codification of a statewide, standard approach to CPL.



Implement a community of practice focusing on campus-based adult navigators/advisors. The CoP will explore and share effective practices and determine the value of expanding this model to Kentucky institutions.



Seek funds to pilot comprehensive support services and programs for adult learners, inspired by the success of CUNY ASAP and similar programs.



Consider the addition of an adult-learner specific metric to the Strategic Agenda during its 2023-24 update.



## Action Steps for Institutional Change: Later



**Explore the inclusion of an adult-focused metric in Kentucky's postsecondary education performance-based funding model with institutional and legislative leaders.**



**Expand flexible academic program options for students.**

- Explore vendor partnerships where master contracts could provide institutional cost-savings and identify financial incentives to pursue operational redesign of courses for a subset of institutions. (CPE)
- Implement/expand modifications such as multiple start times, shorter term lengths, hybrid & online options, and competency-based programs. (campuses)

## Priority Three: Reinforcing Partnerships to Make Transitions Easier

Higher education programs need to engage employers, workforce systems, and others to facilitate the transitions into and out of the workforce that adult learners experience while participating in postsecondary education. These partnerships will create additional supports for adult learners and capitalize on synergies between the needs of the workforce and the needs of learners.

Recommendations in this section focus on identifying and growing partnerships across the state (i.e., outside of institution-level partnerships with local employers) to create larger networks of opportunity and scaled change. Additionally, the strategies focus on deepening partnerships with existing stakeholders with critical work already underway to serve adult learners. These partnerships will work more collaboratively and with greater impact with state groups such as the Department of Corrections and the Office of Adult Education.

Besides the action steps for greater accessibility and affordability outlined earlier, this section includes additional recommendations for employers to help address postsecondary cost barriers. These include increasing financial and educational benefits to employees and reducing bureaucratic barriers like loan servicing challenges. Deepening partnerships with employers and the workforce will facilitate additional opportunities to provide work-based learning experiences like internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, on-the-job training, and transitional jobs. These experiences help students apply academic concepts in practical settings, and benefit workers, employers, and businesses as well.

According to Jobs for the Future (a national nonprofit driving change in workforce and education systems), “Workplace learning experiences are beneficial for all students but can be especially useful for low-income students, people who have jobs but lack the skills necessary for better-paying positions, and opportunity youth who may otherwise not have access to the educational opportunities, professional networks, and social capital that often play a critical role in career success. Likewise, work-based learning helps employers gain access to job candidates who have the hands-on experience they’re seeking.”

Partnerships with community-based organizations are also a critical part of supporting adult learners, as CBOs are engaged in their communities through employers, in schools, and in volunteer and religious activities. These organizations are well connected within their communities and serve the specific needs of their region. Community ambassador models, like those leveraged by the Graduate Network, partner with these critical organizations to help promote community outreach and conversations about the role of higher education for individual adult learners. This is a promising model that merits further exploration.

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## The Graduate! Network is Growing a National Movement to Increase Adult Degree Completion

The Graduate! Network works with states across the nation to launch Reconnect programs that make it easier for “comebackers” (adults with some college but no credential) to finish their education. Tennessee and Michigan are two Graduate! Network affiliates with programs that offer financial aid and personalized support to maximize transfer and degree opportunities for adult learners and build the confidence and skills they need to succeed.

When CPE received an Adult Promise Grant from Lumina Foundation, we partnered with The Graduate! Network to pilot community ambassador programs at Hazard Community and Technical College, Jefferson Community and Technical College and Madisonville Community College. This effort trained prominent adults within local communities to serve as informal college recruiters for adults who could benefit from additional education and training. Ambassadors set up kiosks at grocery stores, distributed flyers at summer concerts, and prominently displayed marketing materials at businesses, schools and organizations.

Further exploration is needed to determine the feasibility of modifying, replicating and scaling this model for statewide implementation.



## Action Steps for Partnerships: Now



Create an asset map of existing partnerships that support adult learners and their transitions into and out of the workforce. These may include industry collaboratives, key employers, trade associations, philanthropic groups, and community foundations. Identify additional organizations for potential partnerships, and identify next steps for outreach.



Engage community leaders in conversations about how to support and expand postsecondary opportunities for working-age adults in their regions, beginning with CPE's Community Conversations, which will be hosted across Kentucky starting in fall 2022.



Through CPE's new Healthcare Workforce Collaborative, establish partnerships with regional healthcare providers to enable current employees to further their education and training and advance in their careers.

## Action Steps for Partnerships: Next



Expand student access to adult-friendly, work-based learning through partnerships with the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce's Workforce Center, the Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board, and other industry collaboratives.



Partner with Kentucky Adult Education to improve pathways between KYAE programs and postsecondary programs, particularly those at KCTCS. As part of this effort, develop a postsecondary access and transition training program for KYAE staff to help them serve as navigators for their students seeking higher levels of education and training.



Work with the Department of Corrections to increase access to postsecondary education for justice-impacted Kentuckians when Pell grants become more widely available in the fall of 2023. This includes transition processes beginning in the justice system and continuing with higher education.



Promote existing state mechanisms to facilitate financial benefits for employees, such as contributions to the KY Saves 529 plan.

### Action Steps for Partnerships: Next



Partner with KHEAA to evaluate single-payer services for student loan repayment for employers, and promote this practice to the employer community if feasible.



Work with the legislature and Governor's office to establish a state-level tax benefit for employers to incentivize postsecondary training for employees. This would supplement federal tax benefits available for the same purpose.



Explore community-based ambassador models and their sustainability. Ambassadors are community-based and institution-agnostic, inspired by models from The Graduate! Network, Tennessee Reconnect, and others.



## Needs Analysis

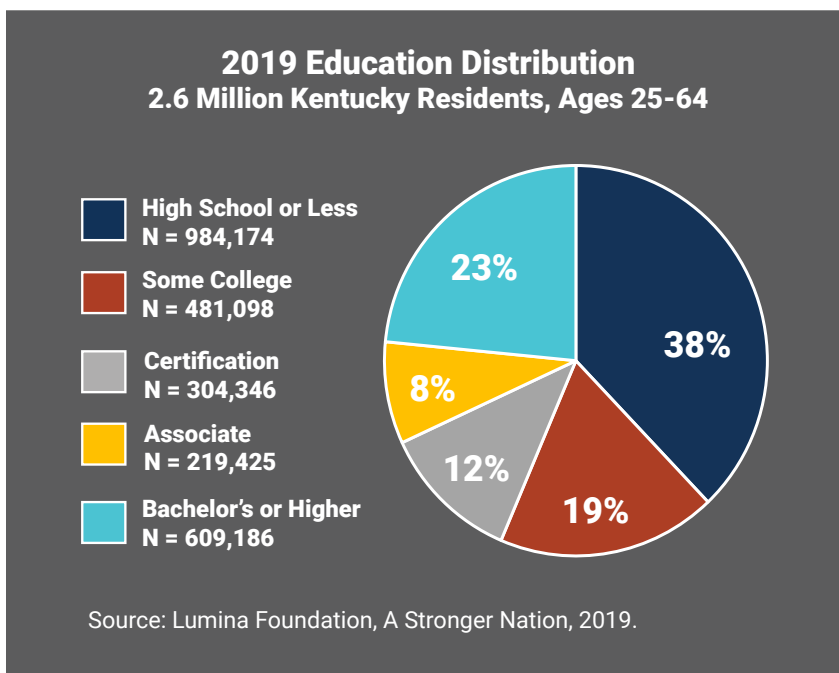
### Determining a Priority Population for Future Action

At some critical juncture in their young adulthood, too many Kentuckians exited the road to postsecondary education and training and are now having trouble getting back on the onramp. CPE worked with a national consultant, Patrick J. Kelly, to analyze Kentucky's adult, undereducated population by age, income, geographical region, race/ethnicity and gender.

As the graph below shows, there are about 1.5 million adults in the state without postsecondary credentials, representing 57% of working-age individuals. Our analysis sought to identify a smaller segment of this population for targeted statewide action, with the understanding that any messages directed at this group would likely resonate with a broad array of potential adult students.

#### This priority population:

- is between the ages of 25-39, when adults typically are most interested in career advancement or retraining.
- is not currently enrolled in postsecondary education.
- has completed high school or some college but has not earned a credential. (Adults with no high school diploma have a longer onramp to postsecondary education, and adults pursuing a second credential do not move the needle on statewide educational attainment.)
- is living below 200% of the national poverty level, making less than a living wage.

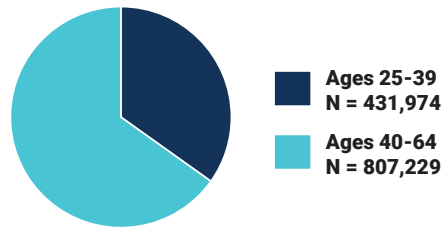


- At 49.4%, KY ranks 35th in the nation in adult educational attainment.
- 3 states (DC, MA, CO) already have exceeded 60% attainment.

## Breaking Down the Adult Market by Age & Poverty Level

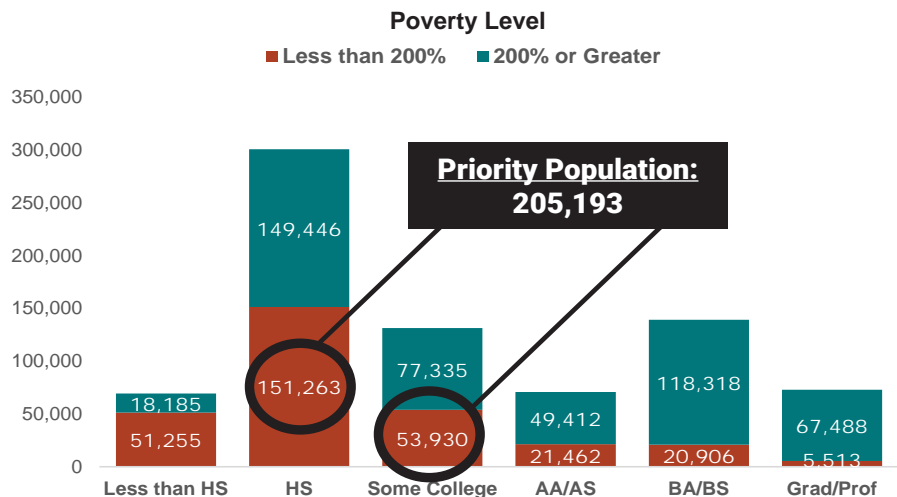
For the purpose of this analysis, we chose to divide undereducated, unenrolled adults into two major age categories: early- to mid-career (ages 25-39) and mid- to late-career (ages 40-64). Given the career trajectory of the early- to mid-career population, it made sense to prioritize these adults for more focused outreach and recruitment. While there are compelling reasons for older adults to return to college, they generally are less motivated by career advancement (upskilling or retraining), which is the most cited reason for returning to higher education. Focusing on early to mid-career adults narrows the priority population to 431,974.

### Adults Ages 25-64 Not Enrolled in Postsecondary Education (2019)



Next, we examined the economic conditions of unenrolled adults, dividing them into two groups: below or above 200% of the U.S. poverty level. Currently, about a quarter of a million adults in Kentucky between the ages of 25 and 39 are living in families not earning a living wage. For these individuals, even short-term postsecondary training can mean the difference between a modicum of economic security or struggling to meet basic human needs. Targeting individuals at the lower end of the economic scale further narrows the priority population to 205,193.

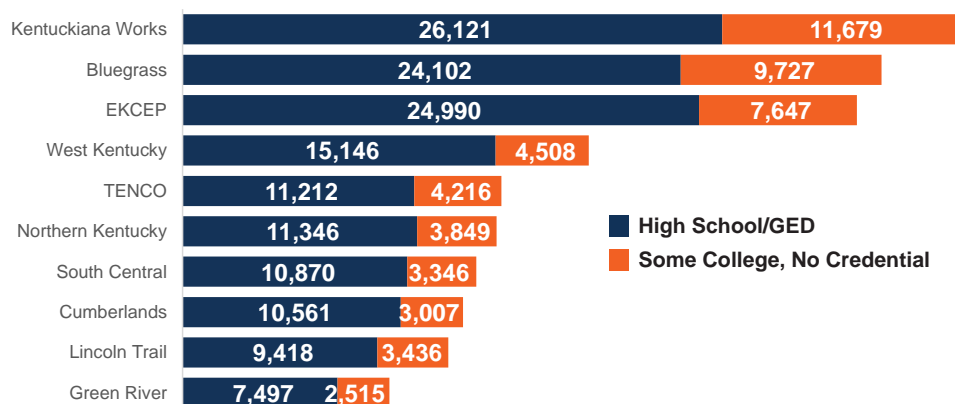
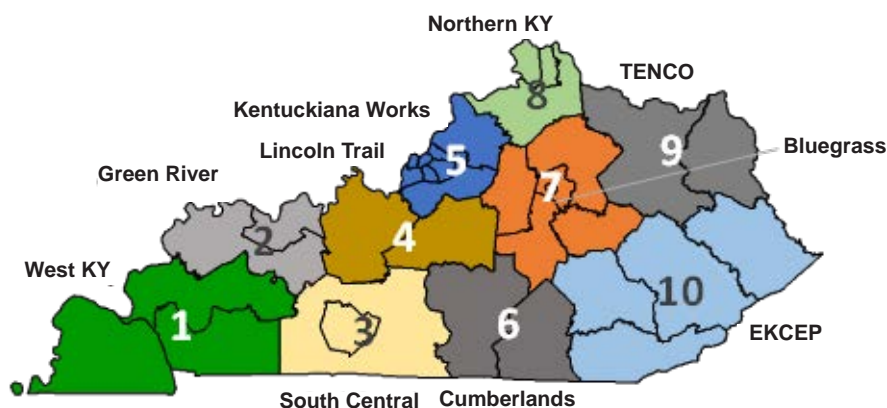
### Adults Ages 25-39 Not Enrolled in Postsecondary Education (2019)



# Understanding the Adult Priority Population

## Geographic Distribution

After identifying the priority population, we looked at their geographic distribution to better inform future communication, recruitment and service strategies. Adults in areas with weak job markets and limited postsecondary opportunities may not feel as compelled to pursue degrees and credentials as individuals living in areas where high-paying jobs and postsecondary options are plentiful. Distinct economic and cultural characteristics can profoundly influence perceptions about the need for further education and training. In short, a message crafted for a Louisvillian will probably be less convincing to a Pikeville native.



As the chart above shows, the size of the priority population in each region varies dramatically - from a low of 10,000 in the Green River region to nearly 40,000 in the more densely populated Kentuckiana Works. Notably, while lower in population, Kentucky's rural regions tend to have proportionally higher rates of early- to mid-career adults within the target population. For instance, the 10,000 targeted adults in Green River represent 25% of all early- to mid-career adults living there, while the 40,000 targeted residents in Kentuckiana Works represent only 18% of that total age group.



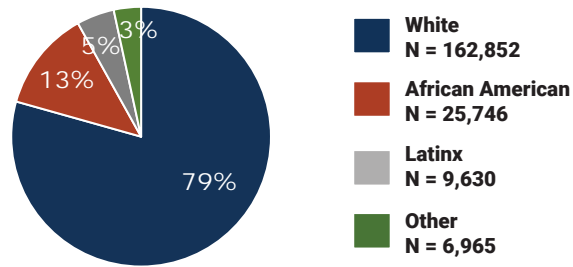


**CPE & its statewide partners are committed to closing educational & wage gaps that have disadvantaged minoritized Kentuckians for centuries.**

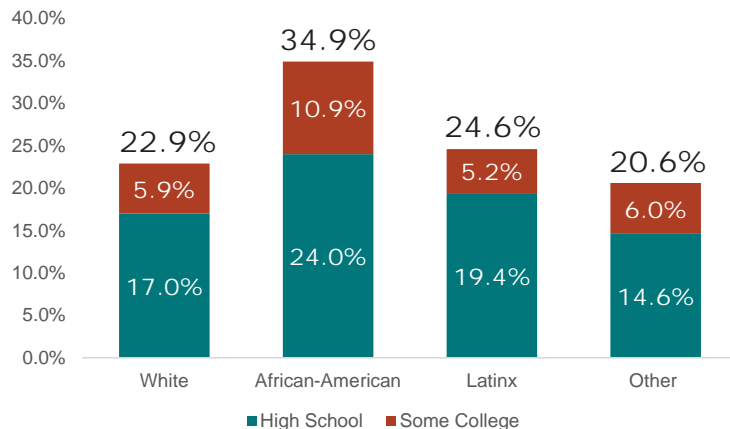
### Race & Ethnicity

CPE and its statewide partners are committed to closing educational and wage gaps that have disadvantaged minoritized Kentuckians for centuries. Viewing outreach and recruitment strategies through an equity lens reveals unique structural and cultural barriers minoritized students face on the path to credential completion, and enables educators to design customized services, supports and accommodations.

Overall, minoritized individuals represent nearly 20 percent of the priority population, which is higher than Kentucky’s overall minority rate. Within that population, the majority are Black (13%), followed by Latinx (5%), and other (3%), which includes Native Americans or Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, or individuals who identify as mixed race. This breakdown roughly mirrors Kentucky’s population at large.



However, the chart below illustrates how Black and Latinx Kentuckians living in poverty (with high school diplomas and/or some college) are overrepresented in the state’s entire population of 25-39 year olds (856,615 individuals). Nearly 35% of Black Kentuckians and 25% of Latinx Kentuckians meet the criteria for our priority population, compared to 23% of White Kentuckians. Additionally, the percentage of Black Kentuckians who left college without a degree is much higher (nearly 11%) than other racial/ethnic populations within the priority population, which suggests structural or cultural barriers that must be addressed.



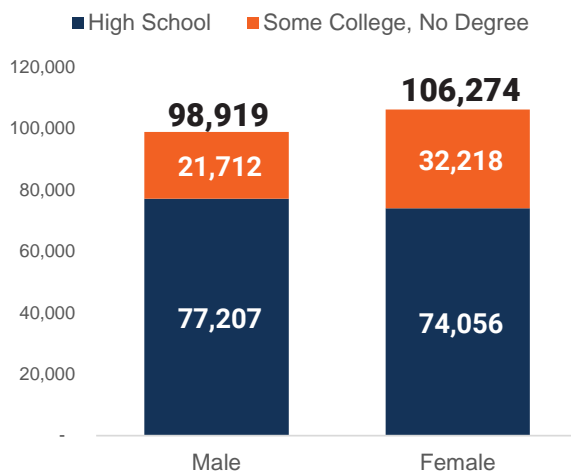
## Geographic Distribution of Racial/Ethnic Populations


An examination of the geographic distribution of racial/ethnic populations within the priority population reveals large pockets of Black Kentuckians in the Kentuckiana Works, Bluegrass, West Kentucky and Northern Kentucky workforce planning regions. There are also sizable concentrations of Latinx residents in the Kentuckiana Works and Bluegrass Regions.

	Black	Latinx	Total
<b>Kentuckiana Works</b>	11,548	4,686	16,234
<b>Bluegrass</b>	4,686	2,917	7,613
<b>West Kentucky</b>	2,860	716	3,576
<b>Northern Kentucky</b>	1,908	454	2,362
<b>Lincoln Trail</b>	1,001	505	1,506
<b>South Central</b>	845	606	1,451
<b>Cumberlands</b>	733	613	1,346
<b>Green River</b>	913	388	1,301
<b>EKCEP</b>	756	505	1,261
<b>TENCO</b>	497	112	609

## Gender of Priority Population

Finally, the priority population was broken down by gender. In terms of both numbers and percentages, females who have completed just a high school diploma or some college are more likely than males to need further education in order to achieve middle-class earnings. However, males in the target population are more likely to have stopped their educational pursuits after high school. This is not uncommon, particularly in the South, as many states continue the transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy.





The information presented in this analysis represents a fraction of data made available to the Attainment Academy, thanks to Kentucky's rich longitudinal data system. As CPE and institutions begin implementing adult learner strategies in earnest, additional data and analyses will be provided. CPE, KYSTATS, KHEAA and other state agencies stand ready assist campuses in this important work.



## Conclusion

CPE is eager to begin implementing this policy agenda for adult learners with our campus, government and non-profit partners. Addressing systemic barriers and roadblocks that disproportionately affect adult learners will improve the economic and career mobility of our workforce and help Kentucky remain competitive during its shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy.

Creating more academic, financial, and student support programs tailored to the needs of adult learners is urgent. Because adult learners are disproportionately low-income and students of color, better serving them also helps close critical equity gaps that hamper our progress and unfairly disadvantage a growing segment of the state's working-age population.

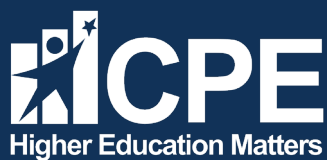
The strategies outlined in this report are not comprehensive, but merely a starting point for advancing the critical work of stemming a decade-long decline in adult postsecondary enrollment. Additional strategies will emerge over time, and some suggestions in this brief may not yet be ripe for various reasons. However, with this agenda, CPE is beginning a new, more urgent conversation about how to serve adult learners and accelerate improvement in our standard of living and quality of life.

## About the Council on Postsecondary Education

**The Council on Postsecondary Education is Kentucky's higher education coordinating agency committed to strengthening our workforce, economy and quality of life. We do this by guiding the continuous improvement and efficient operation of a high-quality, diverse, and accessible system of postsecondary education.**

**Key responsibilities include:**

- **developing and implementing a strategic agenda for postsecondary education that includes measures of progress.**
- **producing and submitting a biennial budget request for adequate public funding of postsecondary education.**
- **determining tuition rates and admission criteria at public postsecondary institutions.**
- **collecting and distributing data about postsecondary education performance.**
- **ensuring the coordination and connectivity of technology among public institutions.**
- **licensing non-public postsecondary institutions to operate in the Commonwealth.**



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