

Council on Postsecondary Education

2019 Board-Identified Priorities

At the 2019 board retreat the board identified five possible strategies to help close the gap between the state's current educational attainment trajectory and the needed trajectory to achieve the state's 60x30 goal. The board asked that staff review each of the proposals and bring back information and data to the board responding to the following questions:

- Will this strategy help Kentucky accelerate progress on the 60x30 attainment goal?
- Is it feasible to implement the strategy given budget and other resource constraints?
- How should the various strategies be prioritized in terms of their return-on-investment and impact?

The information was pulled together by CPE staff and is intended to serve as background information to help stimulate conversation and ideas.

The 5 priorities identified by the board were:

1. Free tuition program for one or two years of college
2. Developing incentives for out-of-state students
3. Retaining students and understanding why students are dropping out
4. Developing tools and programs to facilitate the pathways between K-12 and postsecondary education.
5. Developing strategies to improve access and success of adult students

The following is research related to No. 5:

Developing strategies to improve access and success of adult students

Educating More of Kentucky's Adults to Increase Educational Attainment and Improve Economic Opportunity

Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education Discussion Document

April 25, 2019

The Issue

The Council on Postsecondary Education's mission is to enhance Kentucky's health and well-being by enrolling more residents in postsecondary education and preparing them to excel in a global economy and culture. To this end, CPE established an ambitious educational attainment goal—for 60% of Kentuckians to obtain a postsecondary credential by the year 2030, up from the current level of 45%.

When setting this attainment goal, CPE worked on an analysis of population projections, high school graduates in the pipeline, enrollment patterns, in- and out-migration, and college completion trends. We determined:

- **By 2030, a 7% decrease in high school graduates is expected.** Even if we raise college-going rates from 54% to the national average (70%), there are not enough traditional-age students in the pipeline to meet our attainment goal. Kentucky high schools only produce around 45,000 graduates per year (and falling).
- **Kentucky imports about as many people as it exports each year,** so migration patterns are unlikely to affect our educational attainment in the short term.
- **Kentucky has significant achievement gaps** that, if closed, could boost educational attainment and create a more level playing field. Only 25% of African Americans and 24% of Hispanics in Kentucky have an associate degree or higher. The six-year graduation rate for underrepresented minority students is 37%, compared to the statewide rate of 51%.
- **Enrolling and graduating more adults is essential to meeting the state's 60x30 goal.** There are about 1.2 million Kentucky adults (25-64) without a postsecondary credential. Of those, more than 500,000 attended college but did not complete a degree or certificate. Despite the enormous size of this market, the number of adult students enrolled in postsecondary in 2017 was only 49,000, down from 74,000 in 2013.

Kentucky is not alone in the challenge to enroll and graduate more adult learners to improve the talent pipeline in states and create more economic opportunity for citizens. According to the Lumina Foundation's new strategic plan, nearly 11.6 million adults will need to earn a college certificate or degree to meet their national postsecondary attainment goal of 60% by 2025.ⁱ

Adult Learners Versus “Traditional” Students

Adult learners, sometime called non-traditional learners, returning adults, “post-traditional,” or even “new traditional students” bring a variety of experiences, backgrounds, responsibilities and capabilities to a college campus.

They differ from traditional students due to age (usually but not always 25 and older), employment status (most all are working), responsibilities (many have families and dependents), purpose for enrolling (to get a foot on the career ladder, or advance in a job), experience in college (some have stopped or dropped out and are returning, while others have never set foot on campus), and access to resources (unless funding is available through their jobs, financial aid is often limited).

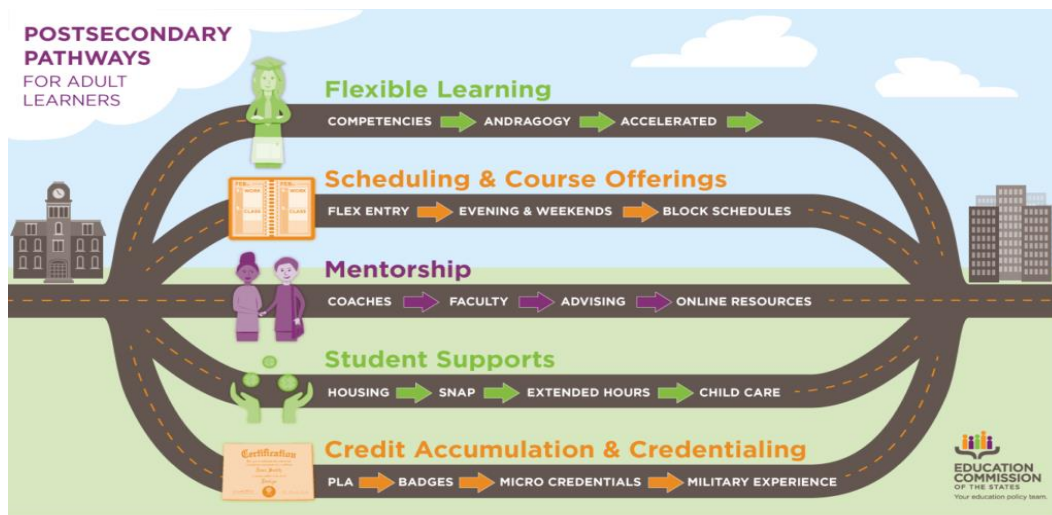
Adult learners may also bring significant life experiences, such as time in the military, to the classroom. They may be more highly motivated to learn, while at the same time anxious about their capacity to succeed. And they bring more complicated, busy lives to campus and need greater flexibility in programming and services than a traditional, dependent 18 to 22-year-old student.

Adult learners are not a homogenous group. There are several subgroups within this population, including: 1) adults who started but never completed a degree, 2) adults with an associate degree who may want to complete a bachelor’s degree, 3) high school graduates with no postsecondary experience, and 4) GED completers with no postsecondary experience. Policy strategies and program initiatives must be tailored for each of these groups.

Strategies to Help Adult Learners Succeed

Even though a significant percentage of college enrollment nationally and in Kentucky is 24 years or older (currently 25% of students at Kentucky’s public universities and 36% of students at KCTCS), many postsecondary programs are still organized primarily around the needs of the traditional-age learner. Often program schedules are not organized in a way that allow busy adults to progress through to a degree or credential, support services are designed for traditional students, extensive work and life experiences are not valued, and courses are offered only in traditional face-to face formats.

As the infographic below from [Education Commission of the States](#) showsⁱⁱ, the success of adult students depends on rethinking traditional ways of offering postsecondary programs and supporting students. Flexible program design and scheduling, accessible counseling and advising services, braiding together various federal and state support systems, and offering credit for prior learning and job experience are important pieces of the success pathway for adult learners.



Kentucky and CPE's Focus on the Adult Learner

CPE has supported campus efforts to focus on adult learners for over a decade. **CPE's Lumina Foundation-funded Adult Learner Initiative** (2007-2010) brought together higher education representatives, elected leaders, and the private sector to develop policy recommendations, partnerships, and programs to support adult learners (particularly those with some college credit). The resulting policy framework prioritized credit for prior learning/experience, financial aid, and flexible academic programming as among the highest need areas for adult students.

In addition to supporting a number of campus programs through the Adult Learner Initiative, CPE held a series of workshops related to prior learning assessment, supported consulting services for several institutions related to credit for prior learning, provided funding for a policy and procedures audit of KCTCS.

For the past decade, CPE has coordinated [Project Graduate](#), an outreach and support program to help adults with 80 or more undergraduate credit hours but no credential re-enroll in college and complete a degree. Project Graduate advisors at each public institution offer various forms of individualized assistance, from performing degree audits, removing financial holds, waiving application fees, and providing priority enrollment or quick admits.

Last fall, Project Graduate advisors participated in a coordinated effort to recruit former students through direct mail, emails, phone calls, and social media, with digital and print advertising templates provided by CPE at minimal cost. More than 3,000 students have completed a degree through this program; more competency-based, online instruction and credit for prior learning would likely increase its attractiveness to adults balancing work and family.

Beginning in 2011, CPE staff worked with campuses for several years to help develop competency-based educational programs that would allow students to learn and progress at a rate that met their abilities and schedules. This builds on the ["Learn on Demand"](#) competency-based model KCTCS introduced several years

ago. Staff also met with Western Governor's University to determine the viability of forming a statewide partnership so Kentuckians could access online, competency-based offerings.

CPE worked with campuses to develop a [one-stop, on-line resource](#) for veterans and members of the military interested in attending or returning to a Kentucky campus to complete a degree. More recently, Kentucky's Adult Education's partnered with KCTCS to offer [GED Plus](#) to allow adults with no high school credential earn a GED and college certificate simultaneously and tuition free.

Funding Opportunities for Adult Learners in Kentucky

In the fall of 2017, Kentucky launched the [Work Ready Scholarship](#), a \$15 million promise program to encourage Kentuckians get the training needed for high-wage, high-demand careers. This last-dollar program is designed to get students on the first rung of the postsecondary ladder by covering tuition costs and some fees for short-term, career-related certificates and applied associate degrees in certain fields.

Recipients must earn a grade point average of 2.0 or higher each semester to maintain eligibility. The program is for individuals who do not have an associate degree or higher, and there are no age limitations. Currently, the program is being marketed heavily to high school students in vocational and technical training tracks.

CPE received a \$400,000 Lumina Foundation grant in December 2018 to increase adult participation in this program through more targeted marketing and recruitment efforts, community involvement, and mentoring and wrap-around services, particularly in low-income areas and among underrepresented populations. Adults without a college credential who wish to change jobs or advance in their current field could be reached at their place of work through new business/industry partnerships.

While the program does cover some course fees, the amount is minimal, and students may remain shut out of programs due to non-tuition-related costs such as childcare and other living expenses, books, course material requirements, and travel.

Adult students are eligible for Kentucky's College Access Program grants, but the first-come, first-served structure of the program often precludes adult learners who tend to apply for admission later in the enrollment cycle from benefitting. At the institutional level, campuses increasingly are directing institutional aid dollars to students – including adult learners - with financial need. These dollars may come in the form of grants built into a student's larger financial aid package or provided on an emergency basis for short-term needs.

Promising Approaches in Other States

Last year Complete College America (CCA) launched [A Better Deal for Returning Adults](#) as one of its game changing strategies improve completion rates and improve educational attainment. The key to the success of this approach is a more efficient path to graduation for adults "including redesigned schedules with shorter terms, year-round enrollment, and consistent time blocks." Also important are giving credit for previous learning and experience, strong advisors and mentors to help navigate the path to and through college.ⁱⁱⁱ

CCA highlights Indiana, Mississippi, and Florida as states with comprehensive strategies to help adult learners enroll, persist and succeed in college. **Indiana's "You Can. Go Back."** initiative is a multi-pronged approach to enrolling and graduating adult learners that includes a statewide communications campaign and supporting on-line resources, guiding strategies for Indiana campuses, financial aid (including a state aid program focused solely on adult learners), and targeted outreach to students and employers through direct mail and calls.

Mississippi's Complete to Compete initiative targets students who have stopped or dropped out and features a Pathfinder application to help students understand how close they are to getting a degree through a transcript audit and the best path to get there. The initiative includes a comprehensive information portal specifically for adult learners, the ability to connect with C2C coaches, the Pathfinder application, and \$500 C2C grants to help pay off past debt or current college expenses.

Florida's legislature passed **Complete Florida** in 2013 to encourage more students to finish programs they started. Housed at the University of West Florida, Complete Florida works with colleges and universities in Florida to help provide accessible, affordable and accelerated options for degree completion. The program offers coaching services, guided pathways to help students find and complete suitable programs, financial aid opportunities, and works with students to help them get college credits and work experience they have already earned.

Next Steps for Kentucky

For some time, CPE and Kentucky campuses have recognized the need to reach out to adult learners and help them skill up and earn postsecondary credentials. **But translating action and intent into sustained impact has been difficult.** In an almost perfect inverse correlation, as the economy has improved over the past five years enrollments of adult learners has steadily declined, with a precipitous drop at KCTCS. Given the challenges that adult learners face in college, the incentive for many of them to return for additional education and training has evaporated.

While this enrollment loss can be attributed to a better economy, **some of the decline may stem from the fact that traditional postsecondary institutions are not well designed for adult learners.** As discussed above, financial aid programs are often not geared towards adults and adults generally need more flexible programs and support structures than institutions can easily provide.

While the challenge is huge, Kentucky can benefit from a wealth of national, state, regional and campus models to better engage and reengage adults in postsecondary programs. And through work like the Adult Learner Initiative, Project Graduate, competency-based efforts like Learn on Demand, and scholarship programs that include adults like the Work Ready Scholarship, **Kentucky is well positioned to expand our work and improve opportunities for adult learners.**

Among the possible next steps:

1. Assess the state's current financial aid programs to ensure adult learners have adequate access to grants and scholarships;
2. Target subpopulations of adults who are more likely to enroll, or reenroll in college, particularly younger adults (22-35), and those who are close to completion.
3. Build out centralized, on-line resources to help adults navigate the path to college, choose the best programs of study for their long-term goals, understand how to pay for college and access aid, and understand how existing college credit can apply to a credential;
4. Strengthen outreach and communications to adult audiences to help connect them with on-line resources and campus programs;
5. Encourage one of the four-year campuses to become the state's lead institution focusing extensively on adult learners. Like the University of West Florida does in Florida, this institution could work with other Kentucky colleges to develop flexible, affordable, accelerated options for adult learners.
6. Evaluate various campus incentives for enrolling and graduating adult learners, including adding a premium for these students in the funding model;
7. Support tax or other incentives for employers to provide time off and tuition support for employees who need to skill up.
8. Develop state policies that provide definition and direction related to reverse transfer, the process of awarding degrees or certifications retroactively to students who may have the necessary program credits from one or more institutions.
9. Develop state policies that standardize practices around awarding credit for prior learning and life experiences and encourage campuses to embrace this practice.

A key advantage of creating more adult friendly campuses and policies is that all students will benefit. Every student needs strong support and advising services, flexible academic programs, clear program pathways leading to a career, better access to financial aid, and ways to benefit from previous learning experiences.

Each of these recommendations require deeper analysis and evaluation to determine budget and staffing requirements and return on investment for students, campuses and the Commonwealth.

ⁱ *Lumina Strategic Plan for 2017-2020*, Lumina Foundation, 2017.

ⁱⁱ *Navigating the Adult Learner Life Cycle*, Education Commission of the States, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ [*A Better Deal for Returning Adults*](#), Complete College America, 2018.