



**A key Lumina Foundation commitment
to increasing adult college completion**

POLICY EXCHANGES

Exploring, Engaging, and Expanding with the Adult College Completion Network

March 2016

The Adult College Completion Network (ACCN) was launched in 2010 to unite a diverse group of people working to increase credential completion among adults with some postsecondary credit but no degree. Funded by Lumina Foundation and facilitated by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), the ACCN works to identify and share in a collaborative learning network promising practices for serving adult learners.

A key component of the ACCN's activities is an annual workshop that brings together practitioners and policymakers from across the country to share their challenges and successes, to build relationships with colleagues, and to discuss emerging trends and research. The 2015 workshop, held Nov. 10-11 in Denver, featured a multitude of perspectives, with more than 80 attendees from 22 states and the District of Columbia representing two- and four-year institutions, state systems and agencies, policy organizations, philanthropies, and nonprofits.

The workshop was built around the theme "Explore. Engage. Expand," and participants did all three during their two days together. This brief distills the major themes that arose from the workshop's presentations and discussions and provides examples of each.

EXPLORE

The workshop offered an opportunity for participants to explore new approaches, new technologies, and new research designed to positively impact adult students.

The innovative initiatives and the forward-thinking conversations spotlighted throughout the workshop demonstrated that – despite working with an older population – ACCN members are in many cases at the forefront of new trends in higher education.

New Approaches

Programs serving nontraditional learners form the vanguard of several exciting new movements in higher education, from competency-based education to partnerships with alternative credit providers. For example, Utah's Salt Lake Community College is in the process of converting its School of Applied Technology (SAT) programs – one-year or less training programs for high-demand jobs – into a competency-based format. The transition was inspired by a desire to better serve the SAT's students, who average 35 years of age and are typically looking to complete high-value training programs as efficiently as possible. By developing a competency-based curriculum in a hybrid format that allows students to complete coursework online but requires weekly "meaningful contact" with faculty, the SAT allows its students to enroll at any point throughout the year, progress through curriculum at their own pace, and avoid spending time on competencies they have already mastered.¹

Another popular approach in higher education is the use of "success courses," introductory courses designed to assist new students in making the transition to college-level learning by building nonacademic skills such as study habits. But such courses are typically

designed with younger, first-time college students in mind.² To serve an older student population, many of whom have previous postsecondary experience of some kind, the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) created the Jumpstart program. A pilot program developed with a Next Generation Learning Challenges grant, this four-week online course is offered for one credit at no cost to students. Jumpstart takes new adult students through the process of designing an individualized learning and academic plan, helping them to align academic and career goals. The program's early results demonstrated a positive effect on consecutive-term enrollment and one-year retention, compared to a matched control group. Jumpstart participants from the fall 2013 cohort had a 90 percent one-year retention rate compared to 78 percent for the control group, and the spring 2014 cohort had an 89 percent one-year retention rate compared to 58 percent for the control group.³

Institutions that serve a high proportion of adult students have also taken the lead in developing partnerships with alternative credit providers – low-cost courses from unaccredited providers – to offer their students affordable pathways to enter or complete degree programs. Western Governors University (WGU)⁴ and the University of Memphis⁵ have each developed a unique partnership with an alternative credit provider – StraighterLine and Saylor Academy, respectively – for this purpose. The early results of both initiatives are promising and may be of particular interest to programs considering similar partnerships since the U.S. Department of Education's announcement of the Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships (EQUIP) Experiment, which will allow selected participants to grant "[T]itle IV student aid flexibility to partnerships between innovative postsecondary institutions and non-traditional providers."⁶

New Technologies

A variety of projects and programs that are leveraging technology to serve older learners were showcased at the workshop. They ranged from an early-stage start-up to a tool that is being scaled to reach tens of thousands of students. Start-up New Ed is working to launch a cloud-based engagement platform that can provide post-traditional students with comparable information on programs' costs and career options.⁷ Meanwhile,

the University of Phoenix is implementing a platform students can use to guide their job search process called the Career Guidance System (CGS). Because more than 60 percent of University of Phoenix students identify as active job seekers, the CGS was developed to serve as a retention tool for this group. The CGS uses a personalized online dashboard to link students to job postings relevant to their interests, to provide information on different career tracks, and to connect them with career coaches to work on skills such as resume writing.⁸

In addition to specific technology-focused initiatives, the workshop included a number of discussions centered on the potential impact of new technologies. For example, the plenary session "From Badges to Bachelors: The Connecting Credentials Initiative and Adult Learners" took an in-depth look at what the rise of digital badges – whether from institutions, employers, or other providers – could mean for nontraditional learners. While consensus seemed to emerge among panelists that we should be recognizing legitimate accomplishments and that digital badges could be a way to do this, questions of verification and validity remain open for debate.⁹

New Research

The workshop featured new findings with relevance for adult students, including a detailed analysis of the wage gains experienced by near-completers (defined in this case as those who "completed at least half of a bachelor's degree but did not finish") who return to finish a four-year degree. The research drew on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to provide a nuanced look at the near-completer population, who chooses to reenroll, and the economic returns of degree completion for this group. Presenter Patrick Lane of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education noted that most existing calculations of economic returns focus on traditional-aged students and do not take into account significant costs – such as higher foregone wages – that are borne by returning adult students. His research aims to provide a more accurate assessment of economic returns for this unique subset of students. Lane's analysis demonstrates that those who reenrolled ended up foregoing, on average, 16 percent of their wages while in school. Meanwhile, degree completion generated, on average, a 17 percent premium on earnings. Therefore, while

coming back to complete a four-year degree does, over time, generate positive returns, the value proposition of returning is more complex for older students. Lane also pointed out the limitations of the data used in his analysis, and suggested that State Longitudinal Data Systems could offer a more complete source of information for future analysis.¹⁰

ENGAGE

The second key theme of the workshop was engagement, as practitioners, policymakers, and subject-matter experts alike credited meaningful connections as the key to initiatives' success. Strong relationships – whether between students and faculty, institutions and employers, or any set of constituents – routinely emerged as a critical element for projects and programs of all types.

Building Connections with Nontraditional Students

Most postsecondary support structures are designed to serve traditional college students, with components such as nine-to-five in-person advising appointments and once-weekly office hours. Moreover, in some cases there is a perception that returning adult students require less support from institutions due to their maturity. The overwhelming perspective of ACCN attendees was that adult students do in fact require robust and dedicated supports to help them overcome the unique barriers faced by older learners.

Presenters and speakers at the ACCN workshop offered a wide range of examples of how their programs are building tailored supports for adult students. Kentucky's Project Graduate reaches out to students who stopped out of state institutions with 80 or more credit hours toward a bachelor's, or 30 or more credit hours toward an associate's degree, and offers them a suite of services ranging from degree summaries and after-hours intake to a dedicated advisor.¹¹ Vaughn Toland, Metropolitan State University (MSU) of Denver's director of admissions, shared how the university has streamlined its transfer process, in particular providing a preliminary credit-transfer evaluation prior to admission and creating an online, open-access database of commonly transferred courses and their MSU credit equivalency. Such specialized services lower the barrier

to entry for adult students looking to return, boosting their engagement with the institution.¹²

Building meaningful connections is also at the core of the work shared by the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) director of veteran and military student affairs. With a military-connected student population of more than 15 percent, UCCS has developed a continuum of comprehensive supports for this group. It begins by partnering with local military Installations to assist potential students in separating from the military and applying to the school, and continues through a specialized orientation process, a peer mentoring program, and sustained academic support mechanisms including priority registration for veterans and a Veterans Advisory Board.

Conversations during plenary sessions and issue-focused roundtable discussions further explored the topic in relation to faculty and administrative staff. Charter Oak State College Provost Shirley Adams led a discussion on various methods of professional development for adult-serving faculty, highlighting the need for offerings focused on targeted topics such as andragogy – the method and practice of teaching adult learners – and online course development.¹³ State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State professor Michele Forte underscored this point in describing how SUNY ensures that faculty advisors are trained in key adult-student topics such as recognizing opportunities for prior learning assessment. Nonacademic advising was also discussed, with financial aid expert David Hutton suggesting that informed and proactive financial aid advising can play a critical role in retention as well as helping returning students to successfully complete.¹⁴

Cross-sector Collaboration

Strong relationships were recognized not only as a cornerstone for student success, but also as a crucial factor in building cross-sector partnerships to promote degree completion. Representatives from two groups deeply engaged in this work – The Graduate! Network sites in Louisville, Ky., and St. Louis, Mo., and the Maine Development Foundation's Next Step Maine – shared their strategies for employer engagement. The Graduate! Network communities explained how they have developed targeted messaging and customized toolkits for employers. By breaking down engagement opportunities into clear steps and outlining the

benefits of degree completion for both employers and employees, staff have been able to leverage effective communication strategies to build relationships with local employers.¹⁵ Similarly, Next Step Maine provides resources to employers encouraging them to support employee degree-completion efforts. In addition, the program acts as a conduit between Maine’s higher education and workforce communities, keeping each sector apprised of relevant developments in the other and working to bring representatives from each to the table.¹⁶

Sample Steps Employers Can Take to Promote Credential Completion

- ▲ **“Employer Toolkit”** from Degrees at Work.
 1. Host a college education fair.
 2. Set up a college tuition deferment program.
 3. Implement a company scholarship program.
 4. Help employees complete a FAFSA application and access funding.
 5. Create a community of practice for students.
- ▲ **“Checklist – Workplace Supports for Higher Education”** from Degrees That Work STL.
 1. Articulate the goal of higher education attainment for employees.
 2. Include education goals in performance reviews.
 3. Mentor employees on education and training.
 4. Establish College Savings (529) and/or Lifelong Learning Accounts as payroll deduction benefits.
 5. Celebrate completion of degrees, certifications, or classes.
- ▲ **“Next Step Employer Strategies”** from Next Step Maine Employers’ Initiative.
 1. Promote educational benefits to remind employees of their options.
 2. Submit company training programs to be considered for certification for college credit.
 3. Allow employees access to computers, printers, the Internet, and other resources to support their studies.
 4. Allow flexible scheduling to employees to attend classes offered during work hours.
 5. Invite local colleges and universities to share adult-friendly program options and to speak with employees about Prior Learning Assessments.

EXPAND

At the ACCN’s inaugural meetings, projects and programs explored what might work for adult learners and how to move in that direction. While ACCN members continue to grapple with these questions, this year’s dialogue showed a shift toward more second-generation considerations. Namely, how do we scale what works? As we scale, how do we ensure consistency and quality? Attendees at the 2015 ACCN workshop delved into how to thoughtfully expand programs and practices that work for adult learners.

Information, Outreach, and Recruitment

In order to scale promising practices, the first step must be to ensure demand. While the country has no shortage of adults with some postsecondary credit and no credential, identifying and reaching this population can be complicated. Most adults who have stopped out are outside the traditional educational pipeline – without access to resources such as guidance counselors – so reaching this group, communicating the value of a completed credential, and providing them with reliable, unbiased information on their postsecondary options can be challenging.

Groups from around the country are approaching the challenge in different ways. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) is developing an online portal, TheAdultLearner.org, designed to provide potential returning students with an easily navigable repository of accurate information on program options for returning students.¹⁷ At the state level, CollegeInColorado.org supplies information from the state’s Department of Higher Education on courses of study linked to the state’s major industries.¹⁸

Alternatively, Connecticut embarked on a systemwide recruitment project titled “Go Back to Get Ahead.” With one-time funding from the legislature, the state’s 17 public colleges and universities launched a coordinated marketing plan and a “buy one get one free” tuition discount opportunity for returning students, resulting in more than 1,400 students returning to school and 49 graduates to date.

Marketing strategies were also discussed in a roundtable session, led by SREB’s Go Alliance Director Alice Anne Bailey, in which the group emphasized the importance of ensuring that campuses are set up to be

Go Back to Get Ahead – The Details

The program operated from June 2014 to March 2015 and was administered by Charter Oak State College, in New Britain, CT, which coordinated the campaign with input from each of the state colleges and universities as well as the Board of Regents (BOR) and the Governor's office. Each institution provided a list of students who had stopped out, and the students were sent a letter inviting them to return. This outreach was supplemented with radio, Internet, and social media ads, a website, and a concerted public relations effort by institutional leadership, the BOR, and the governor.

Enrollment was managed by three dedicated staff members, hired for the duration of the project. They used a customer relationship management system, shared with the institutions, to track students who participated in the initiative from interest through to tuition award.

The program worked by offering three free courses – one in the first semester of reenrollment, one in the second, and one during the student's final semester (if the student graduates by June 2018) – contingent upon the student paying for at least one course in each of the first two semesters and remaining continuously enrolled. Key lessons learned from the initiative included:

- ▲ Clear inter-institutional communication, together with a shared data management system, is key to implementing a coordinated outreach strategy.
- ▲ It is important to have systems in place to serve adults before marketing to and enrolling them.
- ▲ Widespread marketing campaigns can attract those outside the target demographic.

adult-friendly in advance of outreach efforts. Another common thread was the essential role of market research and public relations expertise in crafting effective messaging campaigns.

Scaling Strategies for Retention and Completion

Scaling successful strategies to serve adult students is of interest to nearly everyone in the field. Specifically, providing appropriate placement and remediation opportunities was a major topic of discussion. Colorado Lt. Gov. Joseph Garcia, who delivered the workshop's opening keynote, described how vital fair placement processes are in supporting adult learners.¹⁹ Later in the day, panelist Bruce Vandal of Complete College America lauded Tennessee's statewide adoption of a corequisite remediation strategy, whereby students are placed directly into credit-bearing courses with additional supports built in, rather than participating in remedial coursework.²⁰ Tennessee's pilot study found that passing rates for gateway English courses leapt from 31 percent of students passing over the course of two years to 67 percent passing in one semester with a corequisite model, while gateway math passing rates shot from 12 to 63 percent.²¹ This strategy is now being expanded statewide in Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, and West Virginia and several other states are also exploring the concept.

Other issues of note included how to provide high-quality prior learning assessment (PLA) opportunities at scale and how to develop coherent statewide transfer mechanisms to ensure that students receive all the credentials they have earned. On the PLA front, representatives from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) presented their latest research on how institutions price different types of PLA offerings, along with recommendations on building a sustainable business model for PLA.²² CAEL also demonstrated its online portfolio assessment tool, LearningCounts, which institutions without internal capacity can use to offer a portfolio assessment option.²³

PLA Resources from CAEL

"PLA IS YOUR BUSINESS: Pricing and Other Considerations for the PLA Business Model" – details findings from a 2015 national survey of institutions' PLA price structures and provides recommendations on developing PLA business models. Available at: cael.org/pdfs/2015_cael_pla_business_model.

LearningCounts – offers PLA guidance to students through College Credit Specialists, prior learning portfolio development courses, and portfolio assessment services. To learn more, visit: learningcounts.org.

In addition, University of Wisconsin System PLA expert Diane Treis Rusk facilitated a roundtable exchange on implementing a PLA process with longevity, ensuring that messaging and training related to PLA remains consistent over time and across departments.²⁴

Another strategy that has been receiving a great deal of attention nationally and was highlighted at the ACCN workshop involves what is commonly known as “reverse transfer,” or the “transfer of credits from a four-year institution to any two-year institution from which a student transferred.”²⁵ The University of Utah’s Jason Taylor presented on the results of the Credit When It’s Due (CWID) initiative, which is working with several states to develop “reverse transfer programs and policies that confer associate’s degrees to transfer students when they complete the degree requirements while en route to the baccalaureate degree.” CWID’s results indicate that states with integrated data systems and “opt-out” consent policies for inter-institutional degree audits are better positioned to boost associate degree attainment at scale through reverse transfer. Furthermore, the project’s data show that a significant number of students eligible for reverse transfer degrees achieved eligibility through the use of competency-based assessment, suggesting that competency-based education also has an important role to play in credential attainment.²⁶

Quality Assurance and Consistency

Underlying all of the scale-oriented discussions was the question of quality assurance. As initiatives expand to serve an ever-growing number of students, how do we ensure that they maintain their quality and are implemented with consistency? The workshop’s closing plenary, “From Badges to Bachelors - The Connecting Credentials Initiative and Adult Learners,” dove into this issue, with panelists deliberating on how a more connected nationwide credentialing system might support this goal. Lumina Foundation’s Holly Zanville and Corporation for a Skilled Workforce’s Larry Good agreed that some form of quality assurance must be present for modular forms of learning, enabling people with a diverse array of credentials (such as a digital badge, a license, and a certificate) to present a unified, verified package of skills to employers. The idea of developing a “common language” for all credential types seemed to particularly resonate with the

audience as an early-stage step for developing a system with consistent quality metrics.²⁷

Connecting Credentials

The Connecting Credentials initiative is a national dialogue on building a learning-based credentialing system, led by Lumina Foundation, Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, and the Center for Law and Social Policy. For more information visit their website at: connectingcredentials.org.

In an earlier session, Ohio’s Associate Vice Chancellor for Institutional Collaboration and Completion detailed how one state is tackling this issue. The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) is engaged in an effort to develop consistent reporting requirements for certificates, licenses, and industry certifications issued within the state. With these reporting parameters in place, Ohio aims to provide “clear milestones for learners” and provide more comprehensive information on the qualifications of the state’s workforce, offering a state-level example of what a more connected credentialing framework might look like.²⁸

Conclusion

While the workshop did not provide answers to every question that arose, presenters, participants, and panelists each offered valuable insight into the issues facing returning adult learners in the United States and interesting strategies for serving them. The diversity of opinions and approaches reflected the dynamism of a growing field and illustrated the increasing need to connect and exchange ideas, approaches, and research. As the knowledge base for effectively serving nontraditional students at the institutional, system, and state levels evolves, we must continue to seek opportunities to explore, engage, and expand together.

Endnotes

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³ Beth Mulherrin, “Jumpstart,” presentation, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

⁴ Sally Johnstone and Burck Smith, “Reducing the Cost of Failure and Increasing Success Rates Using Alternative Credit Providers,” presentation, Denver, CO, 11 November 2015.

⁵ Devon Ritter and Tracy Robinson, “The Finish Line Program and Saylor Academy: A Partnership Utilizing OER to Help Stop-Outs Return to Finish Their Degrees,” presentation, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

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⁹ Carla Casilli, Larry Good, and Holly Zanville, “From Badges to Bachelors - The Connecting Credentials Initiative and Adult Learners,” plenary session remarks, Denver, CO, 11 November 2015.

¹⁰ Patrick Lane, “The Return on Returning: Wage Gains for Near Completers Who Finish Four-year Degrees,” presentation, Denver, CO, 11 November 2015.

¹¹ Lisa Cox, “Kentucky’s Project Graduate: Starting Fresh, but not as a Freshman,” presentation, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹² Vaughn Toland, “Setting Adult Students Up For Success,” plenary session remarks, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹³ Shirley Adams, “The Role of Faculty: Professional Development for Adult-Serving Faculty,” facilitated discussion, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹⁴ Michele Forte and David Hutton, “Setting Adult Students Up For Success,” plenary session remarks, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹⁵ Kathy Zandona and Anne Klein, “The Wins. The Losses. The Head Scratching Moments. Employer Engagement Around Degrees and Credentials,” presentation, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹⁶ Amertah Perman, “Next Step Maine Employers’ Initiative,” presentation, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹⁷ Mary Larson, “TheAdultLearner.org,” demonstration session, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹⁸ Dawn Taylor Owens, “College In Colorado” demonstration session, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

¹⁹ Joseph Garcia, “The Adult Student Imperative: Lessons from Colorado,” keynote remarks, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

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²⁸ Brett Visger, “Credentials Count,” presentation, Denver, CO, 10 November 2015.

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