NON-TRADITIONAL NO MORE

Policy Solutions for Adult Learners

Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the *Non-traditional No More* Project

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Executive Summary

Background

From 2008 to 2011, WICHE worked with six states to improve policies and practices to increase adult degree completion as a way to raise overall state educational attainment levels. With funding from Lumina Foundation, the project, known as *Non-traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners*, identified and eliminated barriers that keep adults with prior college credit from returning to postsecondary education and completing their degrees.

By bringing together state and institutional leaders from Arkansas, Colorado, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, and South Dakota (states identified through a competitive application process), the project pursued two main objectives: identifying "ready adults," or those who earned a significant number of prior college credits before leaving postsecondary education without earning a credential; and building a pathway to postsecondary success. The states received modest two-year subgrants to pursue these objectives and joined the project in three cohorts.

Ready Adults: Individuals who have earned a significant number of prior college credits before leaving postsecondary education without earning a credential.

The first objective entailed mining state and institutional data to identify those adults who met a state's definition of ready adult. While these criteria varied depending on the state, they tended to focus on former students who completed at least half and usually three-quarters of the credits necessary for a degree before stopping out. Almost all states in the project were able to identify significant numbers of former students who met their definition.

Work on the second objective—building pathways to success—resulted in a range of policy options and innovative practices that could help states raise overall degree attainment. This work approached the issue comprehensively, examining state and institutional policy and practice barriers in five areas: data, academic affairs, student services, financing and financial aid, and communications and outreach. While many barriers spanned multiple areas, this approach allowed participants

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to focus on the broad and complex factors that can hinder adult degree completion.

As part of the subgrant application process, WICHE required all states to form working groups to tackle each of these five areas. State applicants identified state and institutional representatives to populate the working groups that focused on identifying and addressing barriers that can prevent ready adults from returning and completing their degrees. Early on in the project virtually all working groups discovered that few of the barriers fit neatly into one particular area. As a result, group members avoided the "silo mentality" and intentionally worked across subject areas to improve the environment for ready adults. Most states reconfigured their working groups during the second year of the project as a way to develop and implement cross-cutting solutions.

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The working groups conducted their business through a series of meetings. During each year of the project, states were required to participate in one WICHE-faciliated meeting in which WICHE staff and a team of consultants led in-depth discussions about barriers and solutions related to serving ready adults. States also convened three intrastate meetings without WICHE staff participation to carry momentum forward over the course of the two-year project. Finally, WICHE staff convened an annual state leader meeting in which project leaders from all six states gathered to share promising strategies and learn from one another about how to better serve ready adults.

Rationale

The rationale for *Non-traditional No More (NTNM)* is based on the need for states to raise overall degree attainment rates. While states recognize the importance of improving outcomes in the traditional education pipeline, there is growing recognition that they will not be able to meet ambitious attainment goals without also improving the rate at which adults complete degrees.

Whether one focuses on Lumina Foundation's goal of having 60 percent of the adult population with a postsecondary credential by 2025, the Obama administration's goal of having the highest degree attainment rates in the world, or the various state targets, serving this population is clearly necessary.

Census data show that 22 percent of the adult population has some college credit but no degree.[1] While certainly not all of these former students earned a significant amount of credit, reaching out to the ones who came close to earning a degree could help raise state degree attainment levels relatively quickly and efficiently.

The NTNM project refers to these potential students as "ready adults," but others use terms like "stop outs" or "near completers." Whatever term is used, one thing is clear: serving this population is key to reaching the varied local, state, and national education attainment goals set by elected officials, policymakers, and education leaders.

The purpose of the case studies is to provide a comprehensive account of the NTNM effort and an investigation of the lessons learned in each of the project states.

Key Findings

Over the course of the project, participants identified numerous barriers at both the state and institutional levels that, if addressed, could help raise degree completion rates by adults with prior college credit. Participants also developed and implemented new policies, strategies, and tools to address these barriers and make it more likely that adults with prior college credit could return to postsecondary education and earn their degrees.

It is important to note that participants worked to address barriers at all stages of the process that adults must go through to return and complete their degrees. Improved data mining and outreach campaigns helped attract former students back to institutions, while more comprehensive advising eased readmission processes. Transparent but fair acceptance of transfer credit and credit for prior learning allowed returning adults to progress quickly and develop new skills and knowledge without repeating material they had already learned. New degree programs offered pathways to degree

completion that valued prior coursework while maintaining the academic rigor of a college degree.

State governance structures also played an important role in policy choices. Given that fact, not all of the strategies and promising practices presented here may be successfully implemented in other states and other contexts. The participating states had diverse governance structures, ranging from highly centralized state authority over institutions to decentralized systems with relatively independent institutions. States with decentralized structures tended to employ subgrant strategies to incentivize changes in institutional behaviors, while states with more centralized structures opted more for systemwide policy changes. Both approaches can create better environments for returning adults when replicated but must be appropriate for the specific state and institutional contexts.

Outcomes and Results

This report does not lay claim to specific numbers of adults who returned and completed their degrees as a result of this project. Few states have the capacity in their data systems to track course completions and degrees obtained by returning adults in general, let alone those who may have been targeted by outreach efforts from the project.

Some institutions involved have reported on numbers of degrees completed through programs developed as part of this project, but these reports generally include the caveat that many others may have returned without entering a particular degree completion program. Rather than focus on specific numbers, this report emphasizes the improvements in the environment for returning adults and the elimination of barriers that may have prevented them from completing degrees.

Data collection about this population remains a significant challenge. Some states have made progress and now require institutions to gather and report more data about returning adults. Further, initial results in the project states suggest that the environment for returning adults has improved significantly. These are important steps forward and will make it easier for subsequent efforts to accurately identify the number of returning adults who complete degrees. WICHE remains committed

to following progress in these states and will monitor outcomes and degree completions in the coming years.

General Recommendations and Promising Strategies

The strategies and tools implemented by states and institutions can address a wide range of barriers, but many were effective because they were implemented within a particular state context. The following section outlines the general recommendations for successfully implementing an effort to boost degree completion by ready adults. These general recommendations are followed by specific promising strategies that were identified and tested by the NTNM states and institutions.

General recommendations. While not every idea is applicable in every state, the process by which states developed solutions has led to eight general recommendations for those working to reach and reengage adults with significant prior college credit.

1. **Data mining is a critical first step in reengaging ready adults.**

States and institutions can mine their student record databases to identify large numbers of former students who left after earning significant college credits. These individuals can be targeted with direct communications that highlight available services and programs that could ease their path to earning a degree, as well as provide personalized information about completion options.

States streamlined their direct outreach by first filtering lists of former students through the National Student Clearinghouse to eliminate those who already graduated from other institutions.

Many states and institutions found that contact information for students in their databases was outdated, however. Partnering with private-sector data aggregation firms proved to be a cost-effective solution and provided current contact information for former students.

2. Strong buy-in by both state and institutional leaders is necessary to address barriers.

Successful projects all had strong champions at both the state and institutional levels. Having individuals in key leadership positions who understand the imperative for serving this population is a necessary step for building sustainable and effective efforts to serve returning adults.

3. Conversations between institutions and state policymakers are key.

Both state and institutional policies and practices have a large impact on returning adults, even in states with highly decentralized governance structures. As in many other issues facing higher education, key state leaders and policymakers must work cooperatively and share their perspectives on ways to improve the environment for returning adults. States that have established formal mechanisms for ongoing communication have been able to sustain their efforts and provide feedback as new programs and policies are implemented.

4. Assessing how well institutions and states currently serve adult learners is important to demonstrate success.

States and institutions must develop a clear and accurate picture of how well their current policies and practices serve adults with prior college credit. By conducting policy audits and gathering data and information from the student perspective, policymakers and institutional leaders can better understand current strengths as well as gaps where student needs are not being met.

5. A single point of contact for returning adults can ease the reentry process without significant new resources.

The reentry process can be difficult for ready adults. In many states, institutions have implemented a single point of contact for adults to help guide them through the application and readmission process. Called reentry "concierges" in Nevada, they can not only help place returning adults on the most efficient path toward degree completion, but they can also provide important feedback at the institution about potential policy and practice barriers that could be eliminated.

6. Broad outreach campaigns are necessary to reach all potential students.

As noted earlier in this section, data mining can be a very effective first step in identifying large numbers of ready adults in a state. Policymakers and institutional leaders must recognize, however, that there are almost certainly large numbers of ready adults in a state or near an institution who are not in any of the relevant databases. These individuals may have attended private institutions or started their academic careers at an out-of-state institution before stopping out. Migration may also be a large factor as adults who earned significant credit in another state may move for reasons related to family or career.

Outreach campaigns can help bring these "hard to find" ready adults back to institutions to complete their degrees. While these types of campaigns, when done effectively, can quickly escalate in cost, several states developed low-cost approaches. One strategy was to take advantage of free media exposure through local news stories that highlighted successful degree completers.

Outreach campaigns can also target employers or large pockets of potential ready adults, such as military bases, to spread the word about degree completion opportunities.

7. Examining the data to better understand ready adults is an important first step to serving them efficiently.

There are often misconceived notions about ready adults, but examining the data can help determine what approaches are likely to be most effective. For instance, one myth surrounding ready adults is that they cannot handle the academic rigor of a postsecondary degree. Data from South Dakota and New Jersey suggested that these students mostly left due to financial reasons or because of obligations and responsibilities outside of school. South Dakota's analysis of its ready adults showed that they had slightly better GPAs and performance on state competency exams than all other students.[2]

The lessons here are twofold. First, there should not be significant concern that ready adults are ill-prepared academically. Second, programs for

returning adults must be able to meet needs and provide flexibility to help adults address these non-academic barriers should they arise again.

8. **Flexibility to adjust policies and practices to meet the varied needs of ready adults is necessary to help them overcome barriers.**

Project participants discovered quickly that flexibility was a crucial component of any effort to serve ready adults. While many institutions provide flexible course schedules to meet the needs of working students, policies and practices in other areas may be needlessly rigid making it more difficult for returning adults to succeed.

Advisors working with returning adults found that they had to offer flexible schedules to meet these students' needs. Institutional business offices could not follow traditional hours and expect to meet the needs of adults who might be working during that time period. Similarly, state systems and institutions needed flexibility to address low grades students may have received previously after walking away from courses in the middle of the semester.

An emphasis on flexibility allowed states to meet the needs of students that previously might not have been able to return and complete their degrees. It is important to note that this flexibility must have limits and cannot give adults special treatment compared to traditional students.

Promising strategies. In addition to the general strategies that were effective for state and institutional leaders in addressing policy and practice barriers for ready adults, the project uncovered numerous barriers and potential strategies for addressing those barriers. The section below lists five areas in which project participants identified barriers along with specific strategies and tools that states and institutions employed to address these barriers and provide clearer paths to degree completion for ready adults.

1. Insufficient information—Adults with prior credit who are considering returning to college may not understand the opportunities available to complete their degrees. A related information gap is that faculty, administrators, and even state policymakers may not have an accurate understanding of this population.

Examples of barriers in practice:
▶ Ready adults may not have considered returning to complete their degrees.
▶ Ready adults may not understand how close they are to a degree or that they have already met degree requirements.
▶ Institutions may not provide sufficient faculty/administration support for serving ready adults.
▶ Some may assume these students left because they were academically unqualified.

Promising strategies:
▶ **Targeted outreach**: Using data mining to identify former students who are close to degrees enables states and institutions to craft targeted outreach messages encouraging these ready adults to return to complete degrees. Although contact information may be out of date for these ready adults, states and institutions have used private sector data matching firms to obtain current information.
▶ **Broad public outreach campaigns:** Not all ready adults can be contacted through direct outreach. Some may have moved to the area or attended private institutions, meaning they would not show up in a data mining effort. Broader outreach campaigns, based on market research, that encourage adults to return to complete degrees can be effective.
▶ **Internal communication campaigns:** Outreach efforts should also work to build support among key stakeholders for serving ready adults. Developing state and institutional champions is crucial to long-term success.
▶ **Data analysis:** Understanding how this population performed when previously enrolled in postsecondary education can help eliminate myths about their readiness to handle high-level academic work.
▶ **Personalized advising:** Ready adults may have credits from multiple institutions or academic programs and need more robust advising to help them determine the best possible path to earn a degree or credential of value.

2. Inadequate institutional policy and practice—Most institutions assume that they serve non-traditional students well. Understanding institutional policies and practices from the student's perspective can help leaders identify any gaps.

Examples of barriers in practice:

▶ Institutional policies and practices can be aimed at the "traditional student" even though adults comprise an ever larger share of student populations.

▶ Institutional policies often place students in developmental classes based solely on the results of high stakes tests.

▶ Many ready adults walked away from classes and were left with low grades impacting their ability to earn a degree.

Promising strategies:

▶ **Provide reentry concierges:** Many states and institutions are providing single points of contact for returning adults to navigate the reentry process.

▶ **Secret Shoppers:** Some states had "secret shoppers" pose as potential returning adults to better understand the reentry process from the student perspective.

▶ **Policy and practice audits:** Policy and practice audits help states and institutions understand how well they serve ready adults. Tools like CAEL's Adult Learner Focused Institution (ALFI) survey can identify areas for improvement.

▶ **Redesign gateway courses:** Many institutions have redesigned gateway courses, particularly college-level math, to improve both student success and institutional efficiency.

▶ **Academic amnesty:** Institutions and states can implement policies that allow students to eliminate grades that may have been due to simply walking away from school rather than sub-par academic performance.

3. Unintended consequences of state policies—Many state policymakers may be unaware of how well-intentioned policies can sometimes make it more difficult for returning adults to complete their degrees.

Examples of barriers in practice:

▶ Established policies can prevent institutions from flexibly meeting needs of non-traditional students.

▶ Students may have accumulated significant credits toward a specialized degree, such as nursing or teaching, but were unable to complete a final requirement such as a practicum or student teaching.

▶ Institutional residency requirements can prolong time to degree for ready adults.

Promising strategies:

▶ **Formal communication processes:** States and institutions can establish formal communication processes between state policymakers and institutional leaders to identify and barriers and disseminate promising strategies.

▶ **Generalized degrees:** Offering generalized "parachute degrees" that allow students to apply credits earned in pursuit of a specialized major to a more general degree program can increase degree completion and prevent stopouts in the first place.

▶ **Flexibility to waive policies:** When appropriate, institutions should have the ability to waive certain academic residency requirements.

4. Lack of financial resources—Many of these students originally left college due to limited financial resources and may face the same difficulties upon returning.

Examples of barriers in practice:
▶ Many scholarship/financial aid opportunities are restricted to traditional students.
▶ Some working adults may not be able to afford full tuition payments at the outset of an academic semester.
▶ Some ready adults may have financial holds that prevent them from reenrolling.

Promising Strategies:
▶ **Financial aid policy audits:** States and institutions should analyze financial aid and scholarship opportunities to ensure that there are valid reasons for any programs that are limited to traditional students.
▶ **Payment plans:** Allowing students to make a monthly payment rather than requiring the full lump sum at the outset of the semester can ease the burden on those who may have cash flow challenges.
▶ **Flexible employee tuition reimbursement:** Employee tuition reimbursement plans should match the payment schedule required by institutions in order to lessen the burden on students to provide full payment up front.
▶ **Flexibility and forgiveness:** Providing flexibility, payment plans, or forgiveness can provide an incentive for adults to return to complete their degrees.

5. Limited time to dedicate to college—Returning adults may have significant obligations outside of school and must make the best use of their time in order to complete a degree quickly.

Examples of Barrier in practice:
▶ Ready adults often work full-time while completing coursework.
▶ Family obligations can compete with time needed for coursework.

Promising Strategies:
▶ **Flexible time:** States and institutions can pursue partnerships with employers that offer employees flexible schedules to attend postsecondary classes.
▶ **Flexible course scheduling:** Institutions should ensure that students have access to all courses they need to complete a degree outside of traditional hours.
▶ **Flexible schedules for student services:** Students who need courses outside of the traditional times also likely need to access student services, such as advising and institutional business offices outside of regular work hours.

Endnotes

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey, "Sex by Age by Educational Attainment for the Population 18 Years and Over," accessed on 20 February 2012 at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_1YR_B15001&prodType=table.

[2] Paul Turman, "South Dakota Ready Adult Population, State Context and Objectives: A Vision for the Future," PowerPoint presentation, Pierre, SD, 14 May 2009.

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