

# Adult Postsecondary Education in Michigan & Beyond

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2023

A landscape analysis of challenges and strategies for Michigan to achieve its talent goal to increase the number of working-age adults with a postsecondary credential to 60% by 2030.

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# Big Challenge, Big Opportunity

Michigan is projected to add 374,930 jobs<sup>1</sup> over the decade ending in 2030. Unfortunately, standing in the way of those gains – and the opportunity they offer – are two talent obstacles: demographics and the need for higher education and skills.

On the demographic side, our population is aging and retiring. Birthrates are not keeping pace. And the state is not a net importer of talent. Our overall population fell by 43,212 between 2020 and 2022.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, demands of the workplace continue shifting. The era of the good-paying, low-skill career is gone. Many of those 374,930 new jobs will require postsecondary credentials and degrees, an area where Michigan is falling behind. Among Great Lakes states, we rank last for postsecondary credentials, with 49.5% of adults lacking this ticket to financial security.

Michigan's population fell by  
**43,212**  
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**49.5%** of adults lack a postsecondary credential

While we can do little to influence birthrates or retirements, there is much we can do with the other part of the equation – postsecondary education. Improvements, specifically increasing postsecondary enrollment and completion for adults, can go a long way toward filling Michigan's current and forecasted talent needs, with tremendous benefits for our economy, our state and the families who live here.

By increasing the enrollment and credential attainment of working-age adults in our state, we can fill the reservoir of talent that Michigan's businesses need to grow. At the same time, we can bolster the enrollment and success of our postsecondary institutions, reduce the cost of social safety net programs, and increase tax revenues. Most importantly, we can lift more Michiganders out of poverty and help them to pursue their own version of the American Dream.

In response to these opportunities and challenges, TalentFirst created The Michigan Center for Adult College Success. Authorized and funded by the Legislature, the Center serves as the state's primary resource for research, support and best practices for increasing adult enrollment and completion of postsecondary credentials and degrees.

To set the groundwork for the Center, Basis Policy Research and TalentFirst completed a landscape analysis, "Adult Postsecondary Education in Michigan and Beyond."<sup>3</sup> The report provides an overview of the status and shortcomings of adult postsecondary education in Michigan – along with promising strategies to improve this critical ingredient to our success and prosperity.

<sup>1</sup> Michigan Labor Market Information report by the state Department of Technology, Management & Budget, accessed Aug. 9, 2023, at <https://www.milmi.org/DataSearch/Employment-Projections>

<sup>2</sup> "Census: More deaths than births in almost all Michigan counties," Bridge Michigan, April 12, 2023. Accessed at <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/census-more-deaths-births-almost-all-michigan-counties>

<sup>3</sup> For the full report, visit <http://www.talentfirst.net/resources#publications>



# Sixty by 30

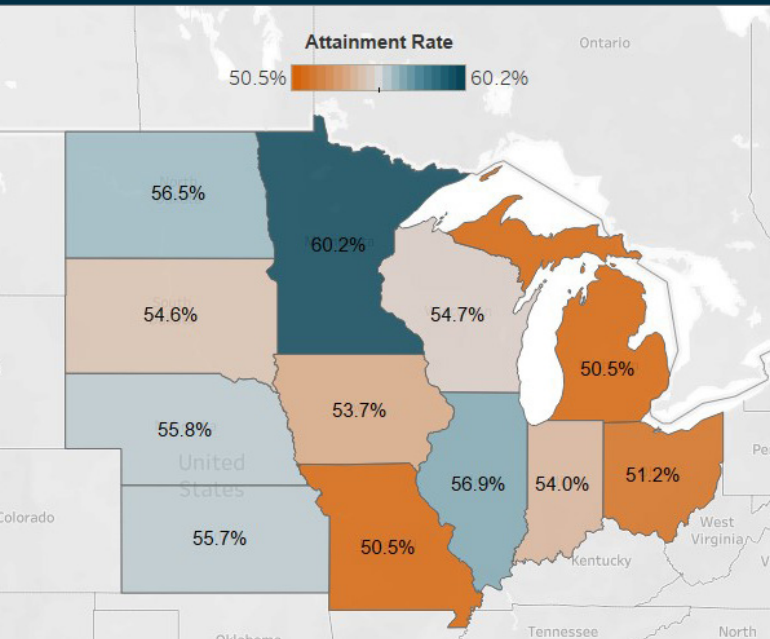
The state of Michigan has established a talent goal, Sixty by 30, to increase the number of working-age adults with a postsecondary credential to 60% by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

# 2.5M

In Michigan, 2.5 million adults lack a postsecondary credential

# 37th

Michigan's postsecondary credential attainment rate ranks 37th nationally and is the worst in the Midwest



With a current completion rate of 50.5%, the state stands little chance of approaching its goal without significantly increasing enrollment and college completion by adults. If demographic trends and migration patterns remain constant, the path to Sixty by 30 will require over 431,000 more Michigan adults to earn credentials over the next seven years.

The state's postsecondary credential attainment rate ranks 37th nationally and is the worst in the Midwest.<sup>5</sup> Just 18.2% of adult students who enroll at a Michigan community college will graduate with a credential in four years — a rate significantly below the Midwestern average of 25.5%, higher only than Indiana at 15.7% and lagging the national rate of 23.3%.<sup>6</sup>

Although these totals do not account for transfers to four-year institutions, there is room for improvement there as well. Only 57.4% of adult Michiganders enrolled at a public university complete a postsecondary credential in eight years.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason for the focus on working-age adults: Michigan's high school graduating class has fallen by nearly 10% over the past decade. At the same time, Michigan's community colleges and universities have seen an 8.2% drop in enrollment over the past three years.<sup>8</sup> We can offset both declines by getting more adults to enroll and complete postsecondary education.

<sup>4</sup> For details of the Sixty by 30 strategy, see <https://www.sixtyby30.org/>  
<sup>5</sup> Lumina Foundation: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>  
<sup>6</sup> Data collected from National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS; author's analyses.  
<sup>7</sup> Data collected from National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS  
<sup>8</sup> MiSchoolData College Undergraduate Enrollment Report

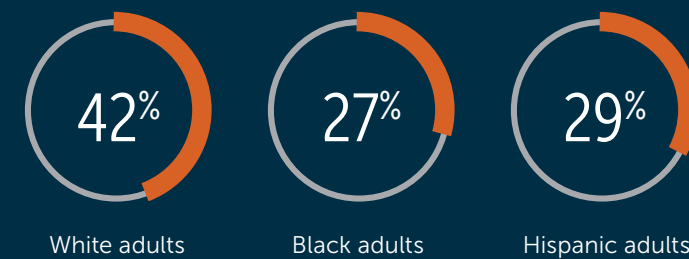
# Closing Gaps

At its heart, boosting adult postsecondary enrollment and completion provides opportunity for Michigan families. Education equals economic mobility, which has been out of reach for too many.

For example, 42% of White adults possess a postsecondary degree or credential compared to 27% of Black adults and 29% of Hispanic adults.<sup>9</sup>

And, despite the significant number of job openings, 39% of Michigan households are living at or below the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold for household survival. There is a strong correlation to income and education levels: Over 58% of working-age adults in the ALICE population lack a postsecondary credential.

Postsecondary degree or credential attainment in Michigan:



39% of Michigan households live at or below the ALICE threshold for household survival

58% of working-age adults in the ALICE population lack a postsecondary credential

Postsecondary education and training offer the surest path out of poverty for Michigan residents. When the workforce grows and incomes rise, participation in public assistance programs falls. The health of communities, civic engagement, volunteerism, and parents' involvement in children's school activities all increase.<sup>10</sup>

2021 Workforce Statistics by Education Level, ages 25-64, Michigan

Education Level	Labor Force Participation Rate	Unemployment Rate	Poverty Rate
High School Diploma	68.4%	8.9%	15.1%
Some Postsecondary Experience/Associate Degree	78.2%	6.2%	9.8%
Bachelor's Degree	86.5%	3.2%	4.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 2021 1-Year Estimates

<sup>9</sup> Lumina Foundation: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>  
<sup>10</sup> Report Brief: Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults. (2014). Institute of Medicine and National Research Council., accessed at <https://www.nap.edu/resource/18869/YAreportbrief.pdf>.

# Overcoming Barriers

Compared to “traditional” students (e.g., young adults recently graduating high school), adults have far more complicated lives. Balancing family and work responsibilities can make it tough to focus time and energy on furthering their education.

Although time is the most-often cited barrier, it is not the only one. Adults face a wide range of challenges to education success. Our landscape analysis highlighted several key barriers standing in the way of postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion.



More than 60% of adult postsecondary students face basic needs insecurity for housing, utilities and food<sup>11</sup>

## CHALLENGES TO ADULT EDUCATION SUCCESS

- 1 Belief that a postsecondary degree or credential is not worth the value or is too difficult or time-consuming to obtain.
- 2 Lack of awareness of financial aid programs and benefits — or finding that the process to obtain aid is too complex and difficult to complete.
- 3 Being overwhelmed by balancing the demands of family, work, and life events.
- 4 Difficulty navigating postsecondary education pathways, which often are poorly aligned to in-demand jobs.
- 5 The need for remedial coursework, which delays or deters completion.
- 6 A lack of confidence based on past educational experiences.
- 7 A sense of not belonging in an educational setting.

The Lumina Foundation in partnership with Gallup surveyed adults in the U.S. and found that **79%** of adults reported that education beyond high school is not affordable, while **81%** reported that only having a high school diploma is not enough to lead to a good job.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Information and analysis of the #RealCollege Survey reported by the Hope Center at <https://scholarshare.temple.edu/handle/20.500.12613/6953>

<sup>12</sup> Analysis of Lumina and Gallup survey: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/postsecondary-education-aspirations-and-barriers.pdf>

# Promising Strategies

Successful initiatives by postsecondary institutions in Michigan and around the nation inform our recommendations for strategies to bring a learner-centered approach to increasing adult postsecondary enrollment and completion. These strategies prioritize the needs, experiences, and learning styles of students, instead of employing a one-size-fits-all approach. To help adults succeed, we must:



## PROMOTE AWARENESS OF OPPORTUNITY

Outreach should be broad as well as targeted to emphasize the value of a postsecondary education and the range of support — financial and otherwise — available.



## ENSURE EASE OF ACCESS

Provide flexible scheduling, including synchronous and asynchronous options. (Flexible scheduling also applies to employer strategies for upskilling current employees.)



## ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO TRANSFER

Leverage reverse-transfer programs (allowing credits earned at a four-year institution to be applied to receive a degree or certification from the student’s original community college). Form inter-institutional partnerships and program alignment.



## RECOGNIZE PRIOR LEARNING AND COMPETENCY

Provide credit for skills acquired outside of the classroom. Increase use of accelerated degree programs to support faster career advancement and earning potential.



## PROVIDE ACCESS TO A WIDE-RANGING SUITE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

Address the complex needs of adult students with intensive advising and early warning systems, help with basic needs, and corequisite support — providing help while the student earns credits — instead of remediation.



## IMPLEMENT GUIDED, CAREER-ALIGNED PATHWAYS

Partner with employers to create guided, career-aligned pathways through postsecondary education to simplify progression and ensure degrees and credentials meet the educational and career goals of adults.



## LEVERAGE HIGH QUALITY DATA TO MONITOR PROGRESS AND REFINE PROGRAMS

Use data to adjust services to meet the needs of adult learners.



# Getting to Sixty by 30: Our Road Map

The following steps were developed after analyzing the barriers facing adult learners and promising strategies to boost adult postsecondary enrollment and completion. The Michigan Center for Adult College Success will collaborate with key stakeholders to accomplish the steps laid out here.



Clearly identify Michigan's adult learner population and the specific barriers they face to postsecondary enrollment and completion. The state's adult learner population is diverse in age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital and family status, employment status, education level and location. The intersectionality of these can affect the degree of difficulty to enroll, persist and earn a credential.

Develop a deep understanding of the local context relevant to the needs of individual adult learners. Michigan's postsecondary institutions will need to know who their adult population is and what their barriers are. They will need to undertake an adult-learner focused approach to develop and implement the system changes to better serve this population.

Conduct a detailed review and evaluation of Michigan efforts to implement best practices. In order to scale effective system changes to better serve adult learners, we need to provide a single location for individual institutions to learn about what works and what does not.

Develop value-added best practices tailored to Michigan postsecondary institutions. Individual institutions will need support to develop the system changes appropriate for their unique adult learner populations and to effectively implement these changes.



Identify and procure resources to support successful implementation of best practices at Michigan postsecondary institutions. Significant change is not cheap, and many institutions lack the resources to complete such an undertaking. This makes it imperative that additional resources be identified.

Provide targeted information and broad outreach to potential adult learners. By investing in this dual approach, we can address the general lack of awareness by adult learners about support systems to help them enroll and complete a credential.

Leverage a wide network of adult education supports and providers – including institutions of higher education, career and technical education providers, nonprofit organizations, state agencies, and employers – to build alignment and improve outcomes. It will take coordinated efforts by the entire ecosystem to build an efficient, comprehensive, and sustainable support structure for adults.

There are still many data elements that are either not collected or not publicly available. These would be incredibly helpful in designing better systems to increase adult enrollment and completion. To build and continually improve systems to support adult learners, these data sets must be made available or created.



# Conclusion

While Michigan's current completion rates for adult learners are below the national averages and the rates of our neighboring states, our landscape analysis finds reason to be optimistic that significant improvements are possible.

The interest and engagement from our postsecondary institutions, employers, nonprofits and the state is remarkable. Working together, we can position Michigan to be a national leader in adult postsecondary success.

The work ahead will not be easy nor simple. It will require strong commitments from the entire postsecondary community, employers, and others to truly redesign the delivery of services and better address the challenges facing adults.

Boosting adult enrollment and completion requires multiple system changes to serve the needs of this very diverse population. A steadfast focus on pursuing a learner-centered approach to reinventing enrollment and education services will be paramount if we are to succeed.


The Michigan Center for Adult College Success is committed to bringing stakeholders from across the state together to develop, implement and scale system changes based on best practices. Our full report goes into greater detail on the next steps we must take, including promising examples from Michigan and around the country.


By working together in a thoughtful, data-informed, and focused manner, we can significantly improve adult postsecondary enrollment and completion across the state. We can meet our goal that by 2030, 60% of adult Michiganders will possess a postsecondary credential — and all the opportunity that provides.

## Get Involved

Learn more about the resources, including Innovation Investment Awards and consulting, provided by The Michigan Center for Adult College Success.

[info.talentfirst.net/mcacs](http://info.talentfirst.net/mcacs)



  
60%  
by 2030





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