



Adult Postsecondary Education in Michigan & Beyond

A LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

SEPTEMBER 2023



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ALEX ANDREWS
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The Michigan
Center for
Adult College
Success

Making Michigan a leader in postsecondary credential attainment.

In 2023, TalentFirst launched a statewide multimillion-dollar initiative to help more adults obtain the postsecondary credentials they need to thrive in a knowledge-based economy.

The Michigan Center for Adult College Success, authorized and funded by the Legislature, will serve as the state's primary resource for research, support and best practices for increasing adult enrollment and completion of postsecondary credentials and degrees.

The Center's role is to complement state investments in postsecondary tuition support programs. These programs, such as Michigan Reconnect, are a great start and the Center provides the next step toward delivering a return on this investment in our state's future.

These tandem efforts – tuition support paired with innovations to grow enrollment and completion – will be necessary if we hope to reach the state's goal to increase the share of working-age adults with a postsecondary credential to 60% by 2030.

As noted elsewhere in this report, the Center fills a gap in Michigan's decentralized postsecondary system, which encourages innovation but limits the ability for widescale dissemination and implementation of best practices.

The Center will accomplish this by partnering with postsecondary institutions to research, design, fund, pilot, evaluate, and scale innovative programs statewide. It will collaborate with educators, employers, workforce development professionals and others to transform systems and make Michigan a leader in postsecondary attainment.

Engagement of all these sectors, along with adult learners themselves, is critical.

Learn more at info.talentfirst.net/mcacs, or contact Executive Director Jeremy Hendges at j.hendges@talentfirst.net.

An initiative of
 **TALENTFIRST**

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01

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

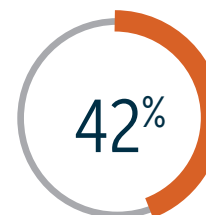
For Michigan to achieve its talent goal to increase the number of working-age adults with a postsecondary credential to 60% by 2030, the state needs to aggressively promote programs and services that better support adults in obtaining a postsecondary credential or degree. The population of Michigan's high school graduating class has decreased by nearly 10% over the past decade, signaling the importance of ensuring our working-age adults have the credentials to meet regional talent needs.

49.5%

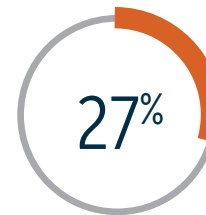
The benefits of engaging the 49.5% of adults in Michigan who lack a postsecondary credential or degree are multifaceted. In addition to tapping a reservoir of talent Michigan's businesses need to grow, we have an opportunity to bolster the enrollment and success of our postsecondary institutions, reduce the cost of social safety net programs and increase tax revenues. Most importantly, we can help lift Michiganders out of poverty and allow them to pursue their own American Dream.

At its heart, boosting adult postsecondary enrollment and completion is an opportunity to close demographic gaps in education and economic mobility.

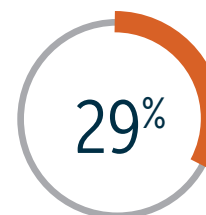
Adults in Michigan possessing a postsecondary degree or credential:



White



Black



Hispanic

White and Asian students are significantly more likely to possess a postsecondary credential or degree relative to adults from traditionally marginalized communities. This difference is stark — 42% of White adults possess a postsecondary degree or credential compared to 27% of Black adults and 29% of Hispanic adults. Consideration also needs to be given to the significant and growing immigrant population in Michigan. Many of these immigrants face unique barriers to obtaining credentials recognized in the United States even though they may have achieved significant academic accomplishments in the countries from which they emigrated. Only by addressing these disparities can we hope to achieve truly significant gains in adult postsecondary enrollment and completion rates.

In this report, we provide a high-level overview of the state of adult postsecondary education in Michigan, identify some potential barriers adults face, and highlight promising strategies to address these barriers. Further, we lay out next steps to better understand the challenges facing adult learners and how to implement solutions to those challenges. The report serves as the start of the conversation to engage postsecondary institutions and other partners to create learner-centered strategies to increase adult enrollment, persistence and completion. In addition, we provide a road map for the work The Michigan Center for Adult College Success will pursue in partnership with postsecondary institutions, employers and other organizations to improve outcomes for adult enrollment and completion.

Of note, we do not use this report to provide detailed insights into the challenges facing Michigan adult learners. We recognize the need for future work to collect and act upon insights from community members on this front. We also omit a robust review and evaluation of potential best practices being tried at institutions in Michigan and across the nation, though we highlight examples and how they may or may not address barriers to postsecondary enrollment, persistence and completion. In future work, the Center will expand on the high-level findings we present here and address these limitations.

The challenges to increase adult postsecondary enrollment and completion are complex and multifaceted. As you will see from the barriers to enrollment and completion outlined in this report, there is no simple solution or quick fix. Transformation to better serve this population will take significant system changes and a rethinking of how postsecondary services are delivered.

Key Findings

STATISTICS

Over
58%
of working-age adults in the ALICE¹ population do not have a postsecondary credential

Compared to neighboring states, Michigan has the lowest postsecondary attainment rate at
50.5%



Only **18.2%** of adult learners enrolled at community college complete a postsecondary credential in four years, the **second worst rate in the Midwest** and significantly below the national average of 23.3%²

18.2%

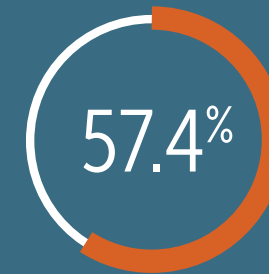
(Completion rates do not include transfers to a four-year institution.)

In Michigan, 2.5 million adults lack a postsecondary credential, signaling opportunity to build upon a wide pool of talent.

2.5m

¹ ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.

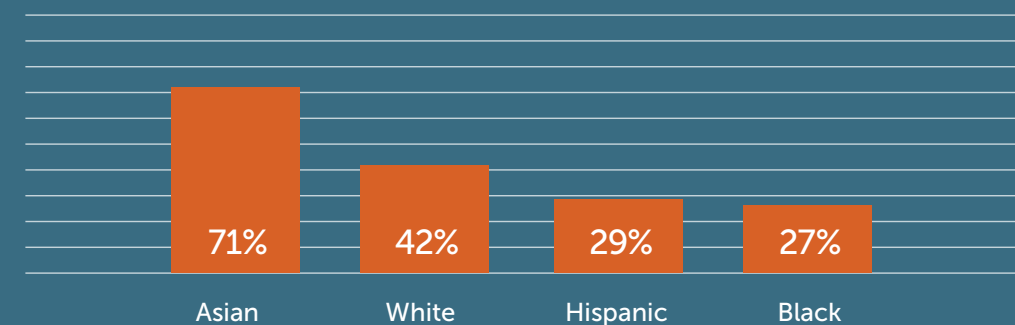
² Data collected from National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS; author's analyses.



Only 57.4% of adult learners enrolled at a public university complete a postsecondary credential in eight years. Although this exceeds the national rate of 51.9%, **it ranks eighth among 12 Midwestern states**, and fails to account for the number of young graduates who leave the state.

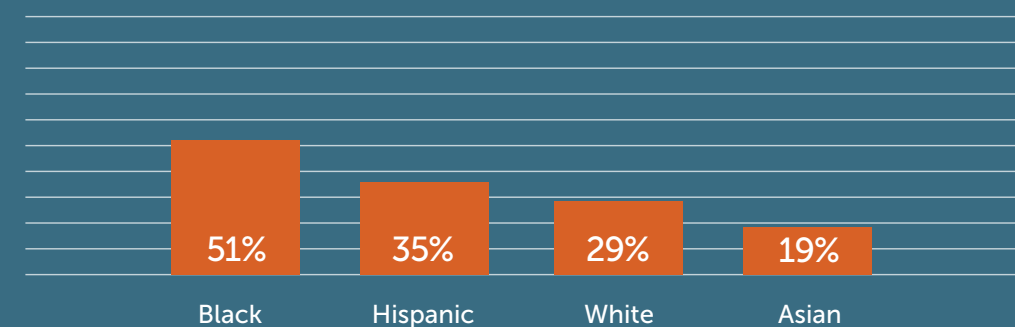
Demographic gaps that must be closed if we hope to attain our goals:

Adults with an Associate Degree or Higher, Michigan, 2021



Note: Data collected from Lumina Foundation: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>; author's analyses.

Students Exiting Postsecondary Institutions with no Credential, Michigan, 2021



Note: Data collected from MISchoolData.com; author's analyses.

BARRIERS TO ENROLLMENT AND COMPLETION

We highlight several key barriers that stand in the way of enrollment, persistence, and completion of postsecondary education among adult learners:

- 1 Adults may believe a postsecondary degree or credential is not worth the value or is too difficult or time-consuming to obtain.
- 2 Adults may not be aware of the financial aid programs and benefits available to them, or they find the process to obtain financial aid too complex and difficult to complete.
- 3 Adults have a lot on their plate — adding postsecondary education while balancing the demands of family, work, and life events can seem overwhelming.
- 4 Postsecondary education pathways are often challenging to navigate and poorly aligned to in-demand jobs. They may require remedial coursework, which delays or deters completion.
- 5 Many adults face negative feelings and perception around belonging in an education setting. They may lack confidence or fail to see a postsecondary credential as realistically obtainable.
- 6 For adults who have some college but no credential, past bad experiences can deter enrollment.

PROMISING STRATEGIES

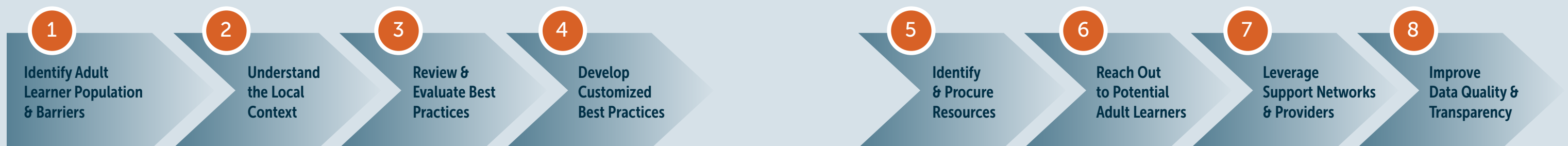
Considering these challenges, postsecondary institutions in Michigan and around the nation have implemented a range of promising strategies to support adult learners. These include:

- Conducting both broad and targeted outreach to make clear the value of a postsecondary education and the range of programs and financial aid opportunities available.
- Implementing flexible scheduling, including synchronous and asynchronous options. Flexible scheduling also applies to employer strategies for upskilling current employees.
- Eliminating barriers to transfer through reverse-transfer programs³ and inter-institutional partnerships and program alignment.
- Increasing use of accelerated degree programs to support faster career advancement and earning potential.
- Recognizing prior learning and providing credit for skills acquired outside of the classroom.
- Widening the availability and variety of support services, including intensive advising and early warning systems, help with basic needs, and corequisite support — providing help while the student earns credits — instead of remediation.
- Partnering 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.
- Leveraging high-quality data systems to monitor program success and adjust services to meet the needs of adult learners.

³ Under reverse transfer, credits earned at a four-year institution can be transferred back to the student's original two-year institution and be applied to receive a degree or certification from the community college.

Road Map

The following steps were developed after analyzing the barriers facing adult learners and promising strategies to boost adult postsecondary enrollment and completion. This provides a road map of action for Michigan to achieve its goal of having 60% of adults possess a postsecondary credential or degree by 2030. 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 national averages and the rates of our neighboring states, there is a 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 to make meaningful improvements 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. Adult learners come from a variety of backgrounds and face numerous challenges. To boost adult enrollment and completion it will take multiple system changes and multifaceted solutions 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 to increase adult enrollment and completion.

This report identifies the next steps we need to take. 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 it provides.



02

INTRODUCTION

Reason for Action

Michigan is at a crossroads where the demand for talent is at a high — over 350,000 job openings exist throughout the state. At the same time, Michigan’s community colleges and universities are facing declining enrollment pressures with an 8.2% drop in enrollment over the past three years.

Meanwhile, high school graduating class cohorts have dropped from 129,689 students in the 2011-12 school year to 117,849 in the 2021-22 school year, a 9.3% decrease. Despite the significant number of job openings, 39% of Michigan households are living at or below the ALICE threshold for household survival. There is a strong correlation to income and education levels: Over 58% of adults in the ALICE population do not have a postsecondary credential.

When looking at the demographic data on the population of adults without a postsecondary credential it becomes quickly apparent that we face a significant opportunity gap as well. Black and Hispanic high school graduates in Michigan are far less likely to enroll in college than White graduates – 11.2% less likely for Black high school graduates and 11.7% less likely for Hispanic graduates. Looking at attainment rates, the disparity becomes more distinct, with 42% of White adult Michiganders with an associate degree or higher compared to 27% for Black adults and 29% for Hispanic adults. These disparities are significantly greater compared to Asian high school graduates and adults.

Recognizing these inconvenient truths led to the creation of the Michigan Center for Adult College Success, which will provide interested higher education institutions with assistance in new program design focused on adult success. In addition, the Center will offer technical assistance and seed funding to test new designs and scale those that produce increased credential completion. Increasing the completion rate of adult learners benefits everyone: Individuals gain greater economic opportunity and mobility, communities benefit from better workforce participation and higher per capita incomes, colleges obtain more revenue, and businesses have access to larger pools of skilled talent.

Over
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a postsecondary credential

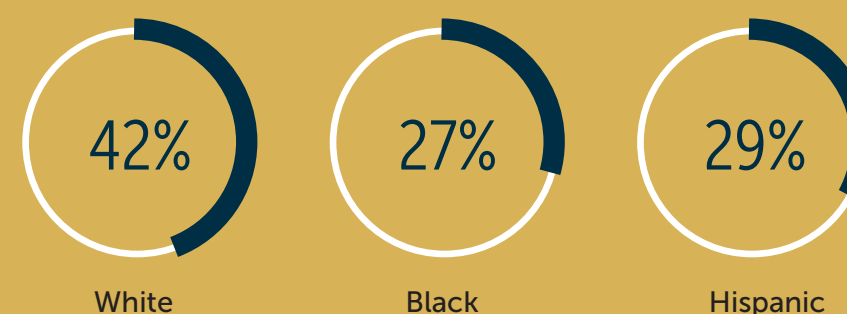
350,000

job openings in Michigan

39%

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

Postsecondary Attainment Rate for Adults in Michigan



Note: Data collected from Lumina Foundation: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>; author's analyses.

Increasing the completion rate of adult learners benefits everyone: Individuals gain greater economic opportunity and mobility, communities benefit from better workforce participation and higher per capita incomes, colleges obtain more revenue, and businesses have access to larger pools of skilled talent.

Current State

Michigan stands little chance of approaching its Sixty by 30⁴ goal without significant increases in the enrollment and college completion rates of adults.

Michigan's completion rate of
50.5%
ranks 37th in the nation and is the worst in the Midwest

At present, Michigan's completion rate of 50.5% ranks 37th nationally and is the worst in the Midwest. 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%.

Subpar completion rates for adults are especially concerning given the state's recent efforts to incentivize Michiganders who are 25 or older to pursue associate degrees and occupational certificates through the Michigan Reconnect program. Without a significant focus on boosting retention and completion among adult students through innovative strategies and solutions, the state will not see the return on investment it intended when the program was introduced. Instead, the program will increase the share of adults who have some college credits and no credential without spurring the improvements necessary to benefit individuals and achieve the state's Sixty by 30 goal.

18.2%
of adult students who enroll in a Michigan community college will graduate with a credential in four years

Postsecondary institutions across the state have been working to implement best practices to better serve adult learners. Michigan's unique decentralized model of postsecondary education provides an opportunity for experimentation and ingenuity. However, that same decentralized model creates challenges in scalability and dissemination to implement these system changes across multiple institutions. The lack of a statewide mechanism to develop, evaluate, and drive system change creates a significant barrier to making the improvements needed across all our postsecondary institutions in order to achieve the state's Sixty by 30 goal.

⁴ The name for the State of Michigan objective to have 60% of working-age adults possess a skill certificate or college degree by 2030.

Future State

Michigan can be a national leader in adult enrollment and completion. By bringing employers, postsecondary institutions and nonprofit organizations together with support of state government, we can redesign the way services are provided to adult learners in ways that increase enrollment and significantly boost credential attainment.

These collaborations will create a more holistic approach to educating adults to obtain a postsecondary credential. Here are just a few of the components that will need to be in place to be successful:

- Creating flexible modes of delivering learning
- Providing supports to address basic needs
- Guided pathways that clearly link the postsecondary pathway to a better job and improved income
- Strong partnerships with employers to help place adult learners in well-paying careers after obtaining their credential

All this needs to be undertaken in a way that puts the adult learner at the center of the system change and has an intentional focus on addressing success gaps that currently exist in education.

Implementing these improvements will require broad partnerships and support. Bringing the entire ecosystem together to work in a collaborative fashion will be essential.

Employers will need to clearly articulate the credentials and skills they seek — and work with postsecondary institutions to ensure programs meet these needs. They will also need to find innovative ways to provide adult learners flexibility to participate in the workforce while obtaining these postsecondary credentials.

Over the past few years, significant efforts have been made across the nation to identify the challenges and barriers that adult learners face. Numerous best practices have been proposed, implemented and studied to address them. Working collaboratively, with the proper investment and support, Michigan's postsecondary institutions can accelerate the work they are already doing to support their unique adult learner populations, address disparities, and increase adult enrollment and completion to achieve the state's Sixty by 30 talent goal.



03

THE
UNTAPPED
POTENTIAL
OF ADULT
EDUCATION

Defining Adult Education



To support adult enrollment and completion of postsecondary education and training programs, we are focusing on adult education programs that serve two specific populations:

1. Individuals who never pursued postsecondary education or training; and
2. Individuals who acquired some level of postsecondary education or training but exited before obtaining a credential or degree.

25+

The field of adult education is broad. It encompasses several levels of education and training, including basic education, job and career training, and postsecondary education or credentialing programs. For this landscape analysis, we define adult education as a postsecondary educational program that provides education or training for either of the two populations listed above. Because datasets and grant eligibility criteria often set the age threshold for adult learners at 25, we consider individuals at or over the age of 25 to be adult learners. Additionally, we focus on adult education programs that lead to a degree or credential that serves the adult learner in the pursuit of economic advancement, professional development, or other occupational goals.

OF NOTE: Throughout this analysis, we acknowledge two separate outcomes with two different timeframes for postsecondary achievement.

First, we highlight **ONLY** graduation rates within four years for community college students and eight years for four-year programs. However, the State of Michigan defines — and thus collects data on — postsecondary success as **BOTH** graduation and transfer within 150% of “normal” time (three years for a community college, six years for a four-year program).

For the Center’s purposes, increasing graduation rates within 200% of “normal” completion time is the primary goal. However, when this report discusses Michigan’s adult education initiatives and the Sixty by 30 strategic plan, we use success rates as defined by state data — 150% of normal time. When discussing these outcomes, we specify which rate we are using.

This discrepancy in data collection and reporting highlights a crucial goal of the Center: to align data tools with the reality of adult learner outcomes. Adult learners may need more time to complete a degree when balancing myriad life responsibilities, and often are only enrolled part time. Additionally, there needs to be consistency on what is being measured and whether or not to include transferring to another institution in the definition of success.

In Michigan, the implementation of the Sixty by 30 strategic plan includes adult education as a core component of the state’s economic goals.⁵ The strategic plan’s overarching goal is to increase the percentage of adults in Michigan with a certificate or college degree to 60% by the year 2030, leading to stronger economic growth, leveling of an inequitable playing field of workforce opportunity, and an increase in salaries and income for individuals and families throughout the state.⁶ Sixty by 30 includes goals and services tied to the need for wrap-around supports that follow adults into postsecondary programs. For example, programs such as Michigan Reconnect, Futures for Frontliners, and Going PRO in Michigan, are designed to provide assistance to adults pursuing degrees, certificates, or credentials.

Many states have turned toward adult education to support state-level economic goals since the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law in 2014. The WIOA established the priority of aligning

workforce investments, education, and economic development systems to promote adult education to help individuals compete in the global economy.⁷

WIOA provides a much broader definition of adult education than we address in this analysis, including a focus on academic instruction and education services below the postsecondary level.⁸ Briefly, we note the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) identifies approximately 120 adult education programs designed to offer basic education supports to adults. These services include high school equivalency testing, basic math and reading skills, English as a second language, and family or workplace literacy supports. TalentFirst addressed these topics in a March 2023 report, [Restoring the Promise of Adult Education](#),⁹ which examines the current state of adult basic education in Michigan and includes a series of recommendations intended to elevate adult education and improve the state’s outcomes.

⁵ For all details of the Sixty by 30 strategy, see <https://www.sixtyby30.org/>

⁶ Sixty by 30 strategic goals are outlined at <https://www.sixtyby30.org/goal/>

⁷ 29 USC 3101

⁸ 29 USC 3272

⁹ Access the report here: <https://info.talentfirst.net/adult-education-study>

Economic Benefits of Educating Adults



BENEFITS TO INDIVIDUALS

Postsecondary education and training offer the surest path out of poverty for Michigan residents, which further benefits communities and the state.

Individuals with postsecondary credentials are significantly more likely to participate in the workforce, find and maintain employment, and earn higher wages compared to their less educated counterparts, as shown in Table 1. Labor force participation among those with an associate degree or bachelor's degree is 10 and 18 percentage points higher, respectively, than those with a high school

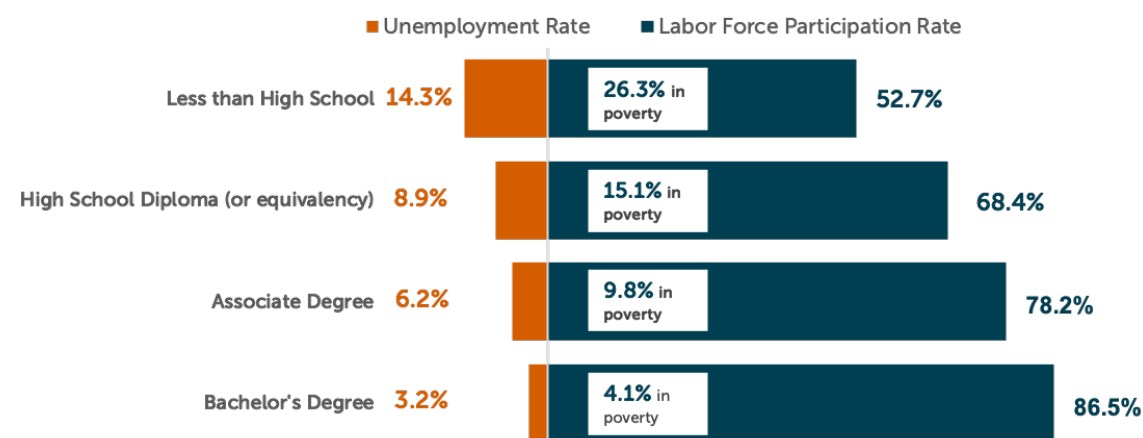
diploma. Unemployment is almost 3 percentage points lower for those with an associate degree and nearly 6 points lower for those with a bachelor's compared to those with a high school diploma. Poverty, likewise, is roughly 5 points lower for those with an associate degree and 11 points lower for those with a bachelor's degree than those with a high school diploma.

Table 1: Workforce Statistics by Education Level, ages 25-64

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

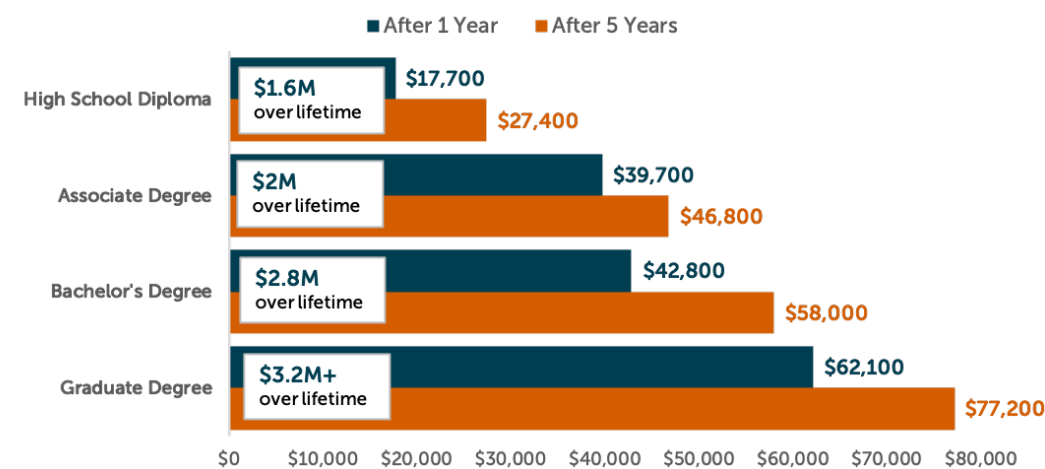
Figure 1: Labor Force Participation and Unemployment by Education, Ages 25-64, Michigan, 2021



Note: Data collected from U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates, 2021; author's analyses.

As individuals develop in-demand skills, they can leverage their credentials to pursue higher-wage positions. The median annual earnings for Michiganders one year after obtaining an associate degree was \$39,700 in 2022, more than double the earnings for those who only had a high school diploma or equivalent. Annual earnings were even higher for recent graduates with bachelor's degrees, who earned a median of \$42,800 one year after graduation. After five years in the workforce, bachelor's degree holders' median income increased even more, up to an additional \$15,200.

Figure 2: Median Annual Earnings by Education Over Time, Michigan, 2022



Note: Data collected from MiSchoolData.com and Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, "The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings" (2021); author's analyses.

These returns add up to significant gains over the course of a working career, assuming the average worker will retire at age 65. The average associate degree holder is expected to earn approximately \$400,000 more than a worker with only a high school education during their time in the workforce, while bachelor's degree holders are anticipated to accumulate \$1.2 million more.¹⁰

¹⁰ Carnevale, et al. (2021). The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce., accessed at <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>

BENEFITS TO COMMUNITIES AND THE STATE

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.¹¹

The economic prospects of children are closely tied to their parents' level of education. Children of college-educated parents are more likely to pursue postsecondary education and demonstrate positive social outcomes.¹² These multigenerational benefits, combined with the positive impact upon the vitality of communities, suggest that each investment in an adult learner will yield a plethora of potential benefits that ultimately maximize the economic potential of Michigan communities.

By raising incomes, increasing the share of workers with postsecondary credentials will inevitably increase state and local tax revenues. In turn, this funding can be used to invest in community services and vital infrastructure that attract more people and businesses and generate more revenues. For Michigan, every high school graduate who obtains an associate degree could translate to an additional \$15,000 in income tax revenues over their working career, which jumps to an extra \$51,000 for every high school graduate who obtains a bachelor's degree.¹³ It's likely these returns will be even greater, considering the labor force participation rate of older workers (aged 75+) is projected to double by 2030.¹⁴

¹¹ 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>.

¹² Kalil, A., Ryan, R., & Corey, M. (2012). Diverging Destinies: Maternal Education and the Developmental Gradient in Time with Children. *Demography*, 49(4), 1361–1383. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-012-0129-5>

¹³ Author's calculation based on Michigan's flat income tax rate of 4.25%.

¹⁴ BLS Publication: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2021/number-of-people-75-and-older-in-the-labor-force-is-expected-to-grow-96-5-percent-by-2030.htm>



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BENEFITS TO INVESTING IN GROWTH



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. Meeting that goal will require significant and ongoing progress in the number of adult learners obtaining a credential within 150% of normal time (three years for an associate degree or six years for a bachelor's degree).

Currently, just 21.2% of adults enrolled at a Michigan community college earn a credential or transfer to a four-year university and 52.9% of those enrolled at a four-year institution earn their credential within 150% of normal time. To reach the Sixty by 30 initiative's goal, two and four-year institutions will need to increase these graduation rates by 2% annually over the next seven years.

If these improvements are achieved, 447,681 additional adults would have a credential by 2030 — almost 80,000 more than if no intervention had taken place. Assuming employment trends remain constant, these additional

credentialed adults would translate to 58,725 new workforce participants by 2030 — over 8,000 more than if no intervention had taken place. We estimate that these added workforce participants would add \$4.3 billion in economic activity by 2030 and \$182 million in additional tax revenue for the state.

All these improvements would financially benefit higher education institutions. As more adults enroll in degree programs, postsecondary institutions will earn an estimated \$462.9 million more in tuition revenue than if there had been no intervention.

¹⁵ <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/alex2919/viz/CenterImpactCalculator/MainPage?publish=yes>

Visit the [interactive calculator](#)¹⁵ to see how changes to adult enrollment and success rates will impact the path to Sixty by 30, local economies, and individual institutions.

447,681

additional adults with credentials by 2030 if improvements are made; (80,000 more than if no intervention had taken place)

58,725

new workforce participants by 2030; (8,000 more than if no intervention took place)

+\$4.3B

Additional workforce participants could produce \$4.3 billion in accrued earnings that would generate additional economic activity and \$182 million in additional tax revenue for the state

Table 2: Implications of a 2% Annual Increase in Adult Success Rates

Measure	Outcome by 2030 w/ Intervention in Place	Net Increase from Intervention Above Baseline
Credentials Awarded	447,681	79,155
Graduates Added to Workforce	58,725	8,383
Graduates Employed	57,033	8,383
Earnings Accrued	\$43,809,412,039	\$4,303,677,865
Tax Revenues Accrued	\$1,861,900,012	\$182,906,309
Institutional Revenues (Tuition)	\$7,785,973,380	\$462,950,773



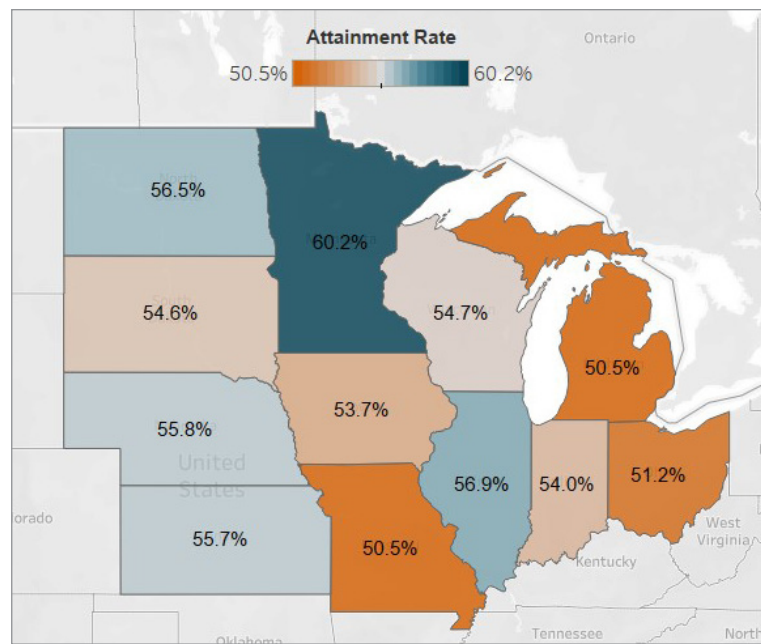
04

THE MICHIGAN CONTEXT

National & Midwest Rankings for Michigan

The state of Michigan is prioritizing adult education with the Sixty by 30 strategic plan. Under the strategy, Michigan aims to increase the number of resident adults earning a certificate or college degree to 60% by the year 2030. The intent of this goal is to fuel economic growth, level the playing field for workforce opportunity and increase salaries and incomes throughout the state.

Figure 3: Postsecondary Attainment Rates in Midwest, 2021



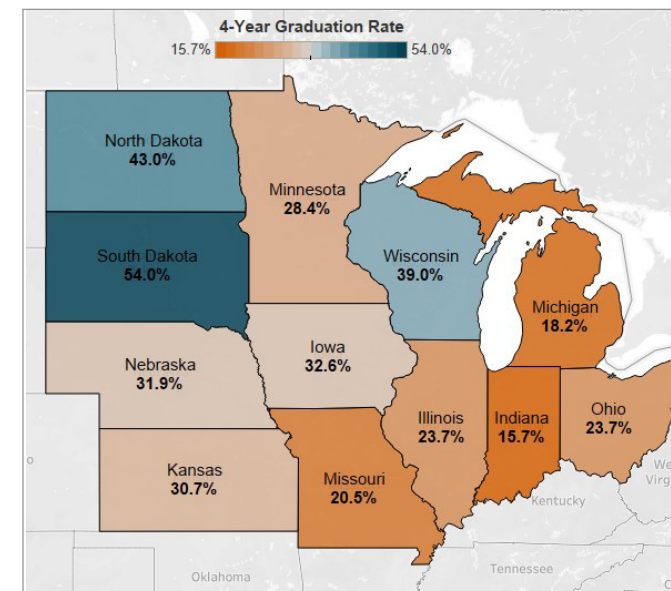
Note: Data collected from Lumina Foundation: A Stronger Nation; author's analyses.

Figure 3 shows how Michigan is lagging other states in the Midwest for postsecondary attainment rates. In 2021, 50.5% of Michiganders between 25 and 64 had obtained a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or occupational certificate.¹⁶ This rate stands well below the national average of 53.7% and ranks 37th nationally. Among the 12 Midwestern states that are Michigan's most direct competitors for economic investment, the state ranks last with Missouri. The next closest competitor, Ohio, had an attainment rate of 51.2%.

¹⁶ Lumina Foundation: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>

The rate of adults enrolling in college has dropped by 19.6% since 2010.

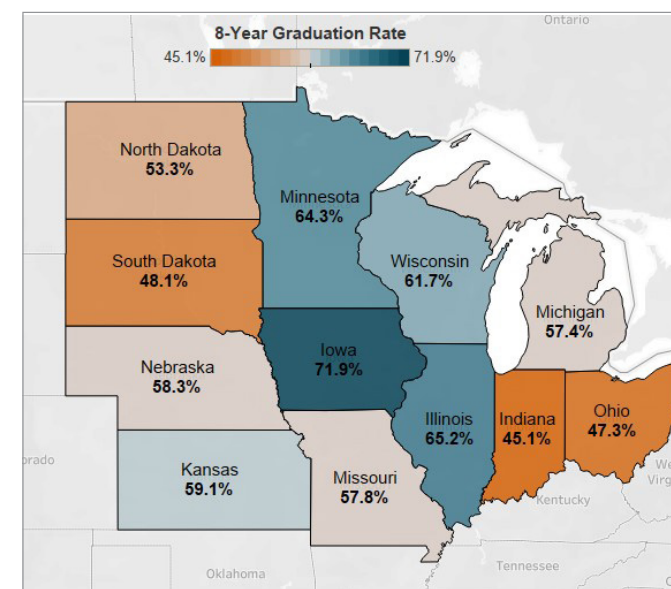
Figure 4: 4-Year Adult Community College Graduation Rates in Midwest, 2021



Note: Data collected from National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS; author's analyses.

Although performance among Michigan's public two-year postsecondary institutions cannot compete on the national stage, the state's public four-year institutions remain competitive as we show in Figure 5. In 2021, the eight-year adult graduation rate in Michigan stood at 57.4%, slightly above the Midwestern average of 55.1% and significantly above the national average of 51.9%. Compared to neighboring Midwestern states, Michigan ranked eighth — slightly below Missouri but far exceeding Indiana and Ohio.

Figure 5: 8-Year Adult University Graduation Rates in Midwest, 2021



Note: Data collected from National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS; author's analyses.

In Figure 4, we show the four-year adult graduation rates for public two-year institutions. Degree completion rates (200% of normal time) for public two-year institutions in Michigan stood significantly below Midwestern counterparts, while those of public four-year institutions (Figure 5) were on par with their competitors. In 2021, just 18.2% of adult community college enrollees in Michigan graduated with a credential in four years — a rate significantly below the Midwestern average of 25.5% and the national rate of 23.3%. Michigan's four-year community college graduation rate is the second worst in the Midwest, exceeding only Indiana's rate of 15.7%.

However, the population in Michigan is aging. Young college graduates continue to migrate out of the state, and the birth rate has stood consistently below the 2.1% replacement rate. Without intervention, these demographic trends will result in a shrinking population and continuing declines in the state's competitiveness — limiting the potential to achieve the state's educational attainment goal¹⁷. At the same time as college graduates are leaving the state, the volume of traditional students who are choosing to enroll in postsecondary education is falling. Total undergraduate enrollment counts for all ages have fallen by 9.1% in Michigan since 2010, but the rate at which adults enroll in college has fallen by twice as much (19.6%)¹⁸.

¹⁷ Learn more from the Altarum and Citizens Research Council of Michigan Report at https://crcmich.org/PUBLICAT/2020s/2023/Michigans_Path_to_a_Prospereous_Future-Summary.pdf.

¹⁸ MiSchoolData College Undergraduate Enrollment Report

Identifying the Target Audience

These worrying trends in the state’s economy and educational attainment of adults warrant intervention. Simply put, Michigan needs to stem declining enrollment among adult learners, which is double that of traditional students. In addition, the state needs to ensure degree and credentialing programs are aligned to the workforce needs of the state, encouraging graduates to remain and support economic success within Michigan.

To support adult learners, it is first necessary to identify and understand who they are. In this section, we leverage data collected by the state to develop an understanding of Michigan adults for whom the Center’s supports and programming are targeted.

As noted previously, we are focusing on two populations:

1. Individuals who never pursued postsecondary education or training; and
2. Individuals who acquired some level of postsecondary education or training but exited before obtaining a credential or degree.

Of the 614,000 students graduating from Michigan high schools between the 2014-15 and 2019-20 academic years, 172,000 (28%) have never enrolled in college.¹⁹ We show the percentage of Michigan high school graduates

who never enrolled in college by specified demographic characteristics in Figures 6 and 7.

The likelihood of enrollment in college following high school graduation varies by race and ethnicity. Black and Hispanic students are more likely to have never enrolled in college relative to their White or Asian peers (Figure 6). In addition, students identified as economically disadvantaged, homeless, or English language learners were more likely to never have enrolled in college compared to the overall enrollment rate (Figure 7). We present the actual percentages by high school graduation year in Table 3, on the opposite page. These trends are emblematic of the range of challenges individuals from historically marginalized communities face when seeking higher education opportunities.

¹⁹ Calculated using graduation rates and college enrollment data from <https://www.mischooldata.com>

Figure 6: Percentage of Individuals Never Enrolled in College, by Race/Ethnicity, by High School Graduation Year

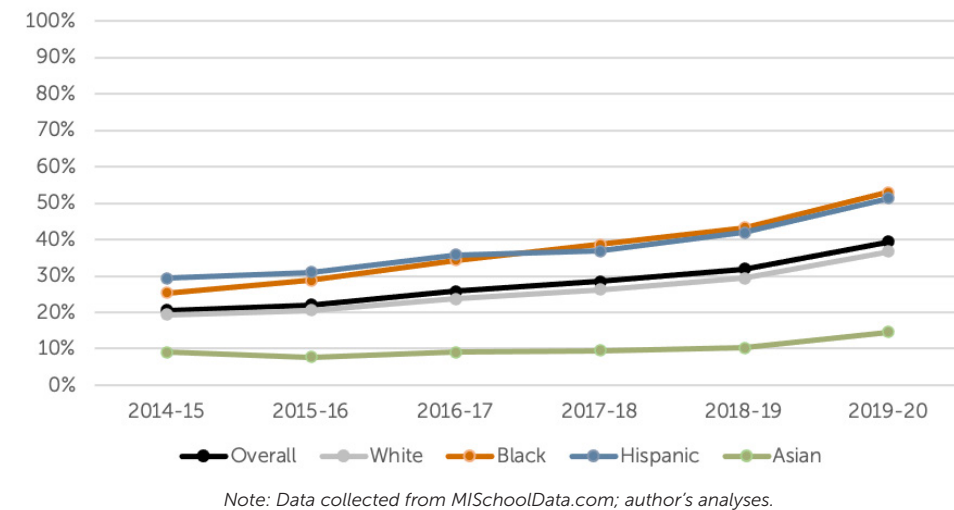


Figure 7: Percentage of Individuals Never Enrolled in College, by Type

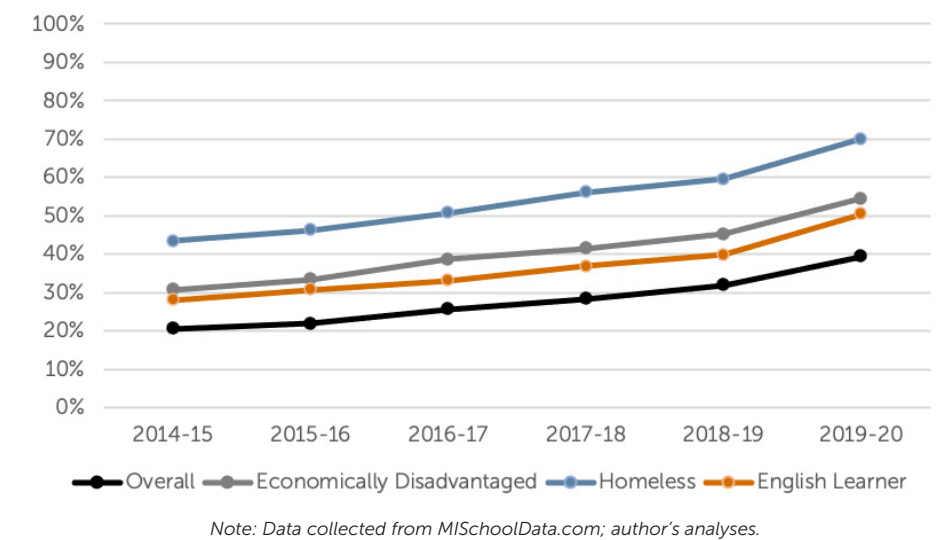


Table 3: Percentage of Individuals Never Enrolled in College, by High School Graduation Year

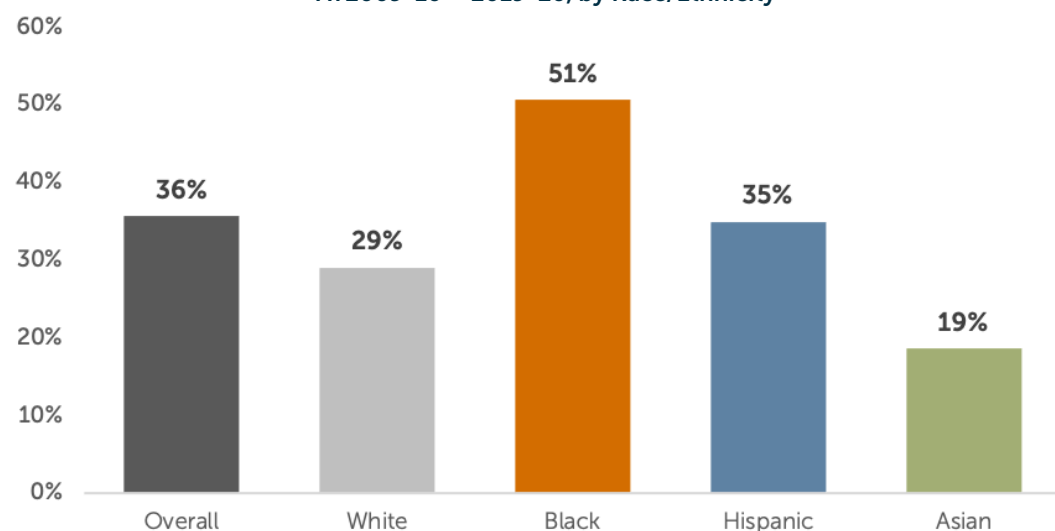
High School Graduation Year	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Economically Disadvantaged	Homeless	English Learner
2014-15	21%	19%	25%	29%	9%	31%	43%	28%
2015-16	22%	21%	29%	31%	8%	33%	46%	31%
2016-17	26%	24%	34%	36%	9%	39%	51%	33%
2017-18	28%	26%	39%	37%	10%	42%	56%	37%
2018-19	32%	29%	43%	42%	10%	45%	60%	40%
2019-20	39%	37%	53%	51%	15%	55%	70%	50%

Notably, the percentage of individuals who never enrolled in college will be higher in recent years relative to earlier years by default. As individuals have more time between graduating high school and present day, they have more time in which to enroll in a postsecondary institution.

In addition to considering students who never pursued higher education, we can use the data from the state of Michigan to see the percentage of students who did enroll in a postsecondary institution but exited before completing the program. **Figure 8** shows the percentage of students enrolled in a postsecondary institution at any point during the 2009-10 through 2019-20 academic years who are no longer enrolled and have not earned a credential.

From the data, we also found that enrollment and completion are less likely for students in traditionally disadvantaged subgroups, including Black and Hispanic students, students facing economic disadvantage or homelessness, and students identified as English language learners.

Figure 8: Percent of Postsecondary Enrollees Exiting Without Credential, AY2009-10 – 2019-20, by Race/Ethnicity



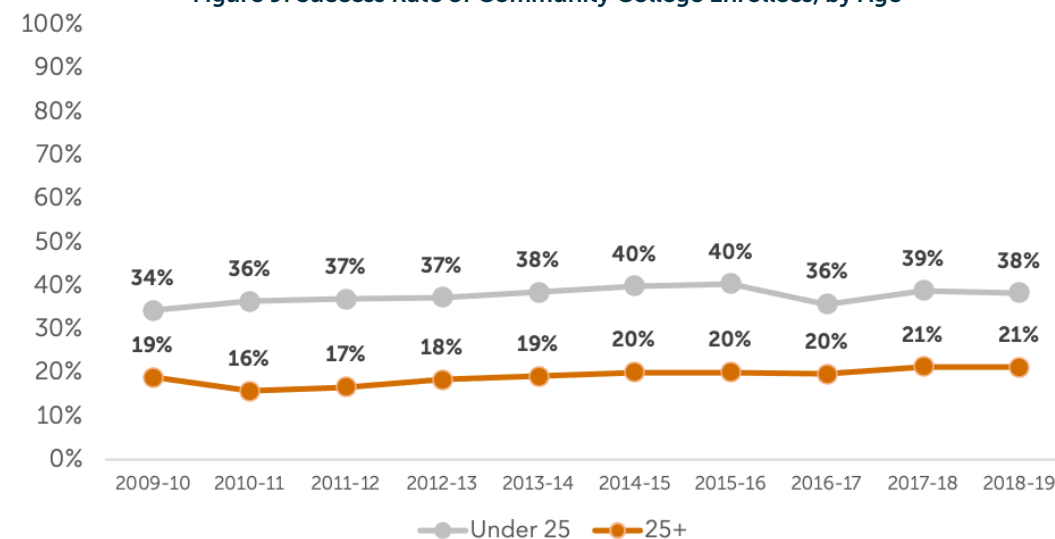
Note: Data collected from MISchoolData.com; author's analyses.

We also highlight differences in postsecondary success rates by age, defined as traditional students (age 18-24) and adult learners (age 25+). In **Figure 9** and **Figure 10**, we show success rates of college students for the 2009-2010 through 2015-16 academic years. In **Figure 9**, success is defined as having earned a certificate or associate degree within three years of enrollment at a community college or transitioning to a four-year institution of higher education. We note that, due to the preponderance of adult students enrolling part time, success rates as defined here may be lower than the body of students more likely to attend full time. Each academic year in **Figure 9** represents the year in which students entered a Michigan community college.

Across all years, students entering community college under the age of 25 are more likely to have success relative to their peers aged 25 and above. Success rates for students under 25 range from 34% to 40%, while success rates for students 25 and older never exceed 21%. In the most recent year available, younger students were 17 percentage points more likely than their adult peers to earn a certificate or degree, or transfer to a four-year institution.

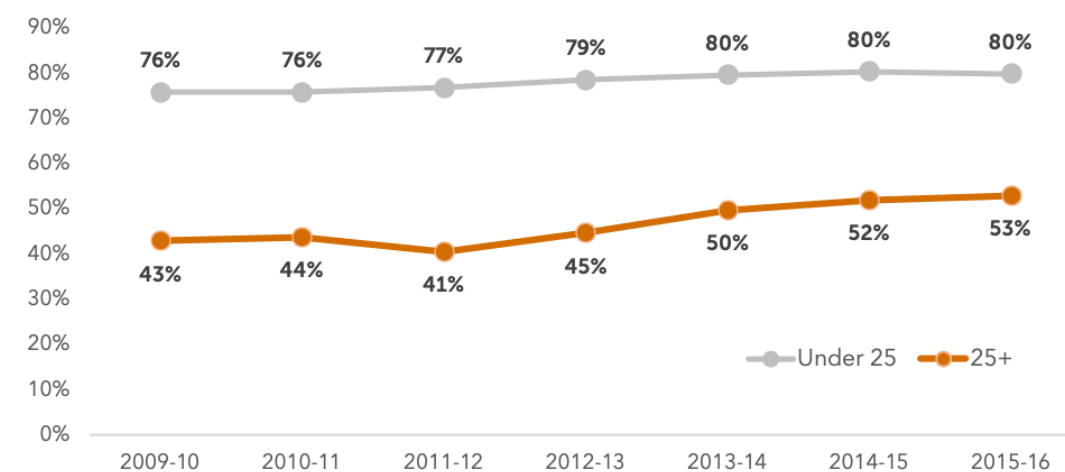
In **Figure 10**, we show the same outcome — postsecondary success — for enrollees of four-year public institutions in Michigan. For a 4-year institution, success is measured as having earned a bachelor's degree within six years

Figure 9: Success Rate of Community College Enrollees, by Age



Note: Data collected from MISchoolData.com; author's analyses. Year represents the academic year in which a student enrolled in a postsecondary program. Because the definition of success includes the completion of an associate degree in three years, outcomes for students entering a postsecondary program later than 2018-19 are not available.

Figure 10: Success Rate of Public 4-Year University Enrollees, by Age



Note: Data collected from MISchoolData.com; author's analyses. Year represents the academic year in which a student enrolled in a postsecondary program. Because the definition of success includes the completion of a bachelor's degree in six years, outcomes for students entering a postsecondary program later than 2015-16 are not available.

of enrollment. Here again we note that, as adults are more likely to be part-time students, they may take longer to achieve degree completion — even beyond the measured six years.

In each year for which success rate data is available, students who enter a public university before age 25 are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree relative to those students older than 25. In the most recent entry year for which success can be measured (2015-16), we do find the gap between younger and adult students to be smaller than in any prior year, at 27 percentage points. Though the gap is shrinking, we find there is still significant progress to be made to equalize student success.

Where are Adults Learning?

In the 2020-21 academic year, Michigan’s colleges and universities enrolled over 500,000 students.²⁰ Of those, nearly a quarter (24%) were adults 25 and older. Using data collected by the Michigan Department of Education, we identify 55 higher education institutions enrolling adults aged 25 and older in the 2020-21 academic year. Among the 10 public institutions with the highest adult enrollment, totals range from 4,390 students in Wayne State University to 8,043 in Wayne County Community College. In fact, nearly half (48.8%) of students enrolled at Wayne County Community College are 25 or older, making it the higher education institution with the fourth-largest share of adult learners. All three Michigan institutions with higher shares of adult learners operate in unique contexts — Walsh College of Accountancy and Business (61.2%) serves a specific population of learners, Bay Mills Community College (60.1%) is a small institution in a rural area of Michigan’s upper peninsula, and Baker College (53%) is a private institution.



²⁰ Data from <https://www.mischooldata.org/college-undergraduate-enrollment/>

Table 4: Top 10 Public Institutions in Michigan for Enrolling Adults 25+, AY 2020-21

Institute of Higher Education	Total Enrollment	Total Adult Enrollment	Adult Enrollment Share
Wayne State University	20,690	4,390	21.2%
Eastern Michigan University	16,599	4,673	28.2%
Henry Ford College	16,857	4,928	29.2%
Lansing Community College	15,751	4,974	31.6%
Grand Rapids Community College	18,744	5,434	29.0%
Schoolcraft College	14,851	5,687	38.3%
Washtenaw Community College	19,104	7,292	38.2%
Macomb Community College	24,928	7,832	31.4%
Oakland Community College	24,143	8,038	33.3%
Wayne County Community College	16,494	8,043	48.8%

Table 4 shows the 10 public institutions of higher education in Michigan enrolling the largest number of adults aged 25 or older. High adult enrollment in an institution or a high share of adult enrollment indicate not only which institutions are providing for adult learners, but also may indicate that the institutions are providing services in a way that leads to easier access for adults. Later in this report we explore examples of these services, such as Wayne State University’s Warrior Way Back program, which serves to eliminate the financial barriers that often prevent students from re-enrolling and finishing their education.

Community colleges are the primary avenue through which adults pursue postsecondary education. Eight of the top 10 schools for enrolling adult learners are community colleges. For total adult enrollment, all the top 10 schools are located in or near population centers. Six are in the Detroit Metro region consisting of Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties, while two others are in an adjacent county.

Michigan Reconnect: An Initiative to Support Returning Adults

THROUGH MAY 2023:

120,700

individuals submitted applications to the Michigan Reconnect program

27,700

applicants received support

55%

of awardees were White

27%

of awardees were Black

In an attempt to increase the number of adults enrolling in postsecondary programs, the state passed The Michigan Reconnect Grant Act and Michigan Reconnect Grant Recipient Act, which are key components to Michigan's Sixty by 30 strategic plan.²¹ Through the Acts, Michigan provides financial assistance that will cover the cost of in-district tuition to adults 25 years and older who pursue an associate degree or Pell-eligible skill certificate. The Acts also include a program that will provide up to \$1,500 toward tuition costs for eligible career training programs in Michigan. The program provides "last dollar" financial aid, which means the state will only cover any remaining costs to the student after they have applied for and received all possible federal grants and scholarships, such as Pell Grants.

We gathered application and enrollment data for Michigan Reconnect through the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity's Office of Sixty by 30. Our data includes demographic information on enrollees and applicants through May 2023. In total, Michigan Reconnect has received applications from 120,700 individuals, of which 27,700 (23%) were supported by the program. Those not receiving support include those who did not enroll in a qualifying degree program. In addition, many enrollees received enough financial assistance through other programs (e.g., Pell Grants) to eliminate the need for Reconnect funds.

²¹ PA 84 of 2020; PA 68 of 2020.

Figure 11: Michigan Reconnect Awardees by Race, (as of May 2023, n = 27,700)

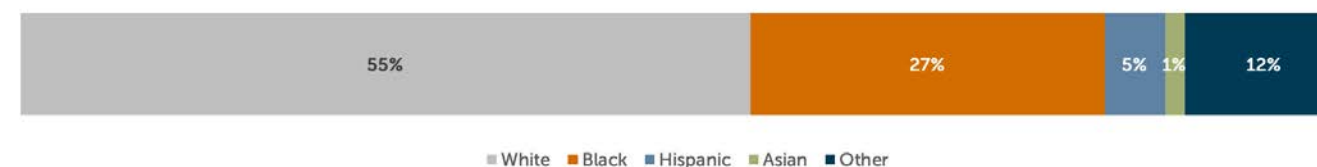


Figure 12: Michigan Reconnect Awardees by Age, (as of May 2023, n = 27,700)

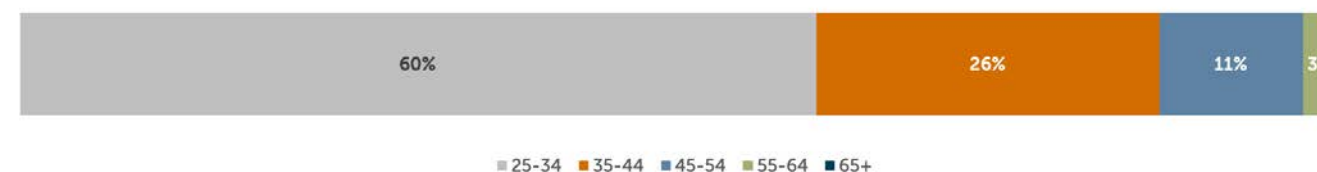
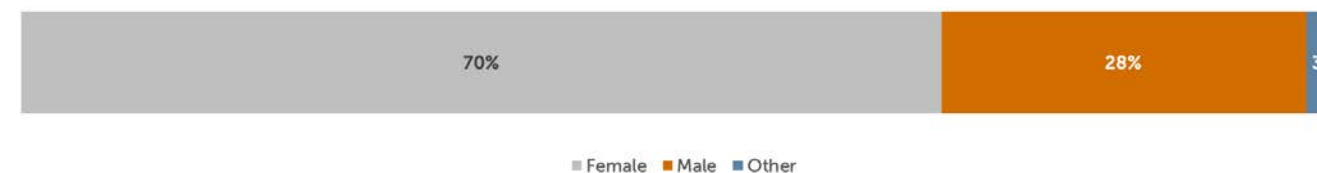


Figure 13: Michigan Reconnect Awardees by Gender (as of May 2023, n = 27,700)



Note: Data collected from the 2021 Fiscal Year legislative report pursuant to PA 84 of 2020 and PA 68 of 2020; author's analyses.

Figure 11 shows demographic data describing the enrolled students receiving Michigan Reconnect grant funds as of May 2023. The majority (55%) of awardees were White, while Black students comprised the second-largest demographic group (27%). Michigan Reconnect officials confirm that the distribution of awardees is representative of the overall pool of applicants.

Figure 12 shows a disaggregation by age of enrolled students receiving Michigan Reconnect awards. Students aged 25-34 comprised the largest share of awardees (60%), with each subsequent age group representing smaller shares. Students aged 35-44 comprised 26% of recipients, students aged 45-54 represented 11%, and the remaining 3% were 55 or older.

Lastly, we can disaggregate Michigan Reconnect grant recipients by gender, as shown in Figure 13. Over 70% of enrolled students receiving grants in FY2021 were women, outnumbering men by a 2.5-1 ratio.

In addition to demographic trends, the annual report for Michigan Reconnect provides information about enrollment at institutions. Specifically, we can observe the number of grant recipients at each eligible institution who earn at least 12 credits in the given academic year. For AY 2020-21, 4,447 students earned at least 12 credits across 31 postsecondary institutions. The institutions with the largest enrollment count associated with Michigan Reconnect are in more densely populated areas and include Grand Rapids Community College (386), Oakland Community College (344), Macomb Community College (332), and Washtenaw Community College (318).²²

²² Data for institutions with Michigan Reconnect grant enrollees is available in the Michigan Reconnect Annual Report for FY21 at <https://bit.ly/3KvksGK>.



05

BARRIERS TO
PARTICIPATION
IN ADULT
POSTSECONDARY
EDUCATION

Barriers

Adults face a wide range of barriers that impede their access to and participation in postsecondary degree and credentialing programs. Given their different roles and responsibilities compared to traditional students (e.g., young adults recently graduating high school), it follows that adult learners face distinct challenges in the pursuit of higher education. In this section, we highlight those barriers as they are presented in the base of research on adult education. Specifically, we identify barriers within six primary categories: personal and professional responsibilities, financial barriers, access and awareness of support, academic barriers, behavioral and mental health barriers, and barriers specific to certain populations.



Personal & Professional Responsibilities

Many adult learners work full-time or part-time jobs while attending school, as confirmed by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.²³ Moreover, many adults have family obligations such as childcare or eldercare that demand their time and energy. These challenges can create a complex balancing act, making it difficult for adult learners to dedicate sufficient time to their studies.²⁴

In 2012, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) collected survey data on a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults. The survey provided respondents with six barriers inhibiting pursuit of additional education and asked participants to select their primary barrier. The most common response, selected by 28% of respondents, was the lack of available time.²⁵ Other factors related to timing — for instance, needing childcare (17%), or the timing as inconvenient (11%) — also ranked highly on the OECD's survey.

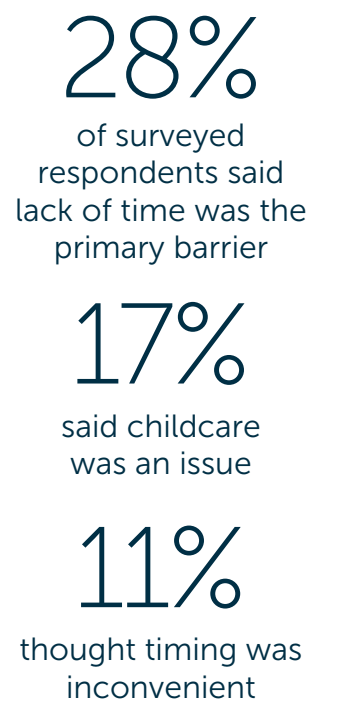
The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's (WICHE) Non-traditional No More Project also found that time limits the ability of adult learners to seek additional education opportunities. Through the project, WICHE sought to identify and eliminate barriers that prevent adults from returning to postsecondary education.²⁶ In their work, which involved extensive case studies in six states, WICHE noted that adults had limited time to dedicate to college, as adults often work full time and have family obligations — both of which conflict with college coursework and obligations.

²³ Kena, G., Musu-Gillette, L., Robinson, J., Wang, X., Rathbun, A., Zhang, J., ... & Velez, E. D. V. (2015). The Condition of Education 2015. NCES 2015-144. *National Center for Education Statistics*. Accessed at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556901.pdf>

²⁴ Kasworm, C. E. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(2), 143-160. Accessed at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0741713609336110>

²⁵ OECD survey data: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=117531>

²⁶ WICHE's Nontraditional No More project: <https://www.wiche.edu/resources/going-the-distance-in-adult-college-completion-lessons-from-the-non-traditional-no-more-project/>



Financial

The financial responsibilities of adult learners often far surpass those of traditional students. The cost of tuition, books, and fees can place a significant burden on adult learners, many of whom are financially independent and may also be supporting dependents.²⁷ When it comes to covering the costs of surviving, upwards of 60% of adult postsecondary students face basic needs insecurity for housing, utilities and food.²⁸ For those with children, the high cost of childcare can present yet another financial challenge.²⁹ In their *State of Higher Education 2023 Report*, Gallup and the Lumina Foundation identify the cost of degree/credential programs (55%) and inflation (45%) as the leading reasons why unenrolled adults are not enrolled.³⁰ In addition to contributing to adults opting out of enrollment, financial constraints may also lead adults to enroll part-time to manage the costs of attendance.

In the OECD survey, the cost of postsecondary education was the second-most commonly identified barrier.³¹ 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.³²

Federal financial aid for postsecondary education or training tends to follow strict financial eligibility criteria, which is a disadvantage to working adults.³³ Many federal loans are only available to students attending a program at half time or more (which may not be an option for working adults), while Pell Grants — though available at less than half time — tend to be inaccessible to working adults due to income thresholds. In addition, Pell Grants are applicable specifically to degree-granting programs, which excludes adults wishing to pursue a non-degree credential program. State aid is much more limited and less available to adult learners and generally these policies follow federal eligibility rules, making state aid less accessible to adult learners.³⁴

79%
of adults said education beyond high school is not affordable; 81% said that just having a high school diploma is not enough to lead to a good job

²⁷ Choy, S. (2002). Nontraditional Undergraduates: Findings from the Condition of Education 2002. NCES 2002-012. *National Center for Education Statistics*. Accessed at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED546117.pdf>

²⁸ Information and analysis of the #RealCollege Survey reported by the Hope Center at <https://scholarshare.temple.edu/handle/20.500.12613/6953>

²⁹ Kena, G., Musu-Gillette, L., Robinson, J., Wang, X., Rathbun, A., Zhang, J., ... & Velez, E. D. V. (2015). The Condition of Education 2015. NCES 2015-144. National Center for Education Statistics. Accessed at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556901.pdf>

³⁰ See the latest *State of Higher Education Report* at <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/468986/state-of-higher-education.aspx>

³¹ OECD survey data: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=117531>

³² Analysis of Lumina and Gallup survey: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/postsecondary-education-aspirations-and-barriers.pdf>

³³ Kazis, R., Callahan, A., Davidson, C., McLeod, A., Bosworth, B., Choitz, V., & Hoops, J. (2007). Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results. Employment and Training Administration. Occasional Paper 2007-03. *Jobs for the Future*., accessed at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497801.pdf>

³⁴ Ibid.

Access & Awareness of Support

Many adult learners are not aware of the postsecondary programs, financial aid options, academic resources, or support services available to them, creating a significant barrier to their success.³⁵

Even when such resources exist, access can be a challenge. For example, adult learners may find that academic support services and extracurricular activities are scheduled at times that conflict with their work or family responsibilities. Additionally, adult learners may find it difficult to navigate the complexities of the academic system, from understanding degree requirements to navigating the enrollment process.

Awareness of options and eligibility are necessary for adults to consider pursuing postsecondary education, but many adult learners often begin with an information deficit.³⁶ Adults are less likely to be aware of academic

requirements, supports, and financial aid eligibility and availability.^{37, 38} While adults are enrolled in postsecondary degree or training programs, they are often provided a system of supports oriented to a traditional student. For the higher education institution, it may be difficult to budget for the additional and varied needs of adult learners, which includes providing support services (e.g., counseling, scheduling, financial aid services) outside of traditional hours. However, the lack of these services in times and modalities accessible to adult learners serves as a barrier to adults.³⁹

³⁵ Kazis, R., Callahan, A., Davidson, C., McLeod, A., Bosworth, B., Choitz, V., & Hoops, J. (2007). Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results. Employment and Training Administration. Occasional Paper 2007-03. *Jobs for the Future*. Accessed at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497801.pdf>

³⁶ Pusser, B., Breneman, D. W., Gansneder, B. M., Kohl, K. J., Levin, J. S., Milam, J. H., & Turner, S. E. (2007). Returning to learning: Adults' success in college is key to America's future. Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation. Accessed at <https://folio.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/10244/270/ReturntolearningApril2007.pdf>

³⁷ Lane, P., Michelau, D. K., & Palmer, I. (2012). Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the "Non-Traditional No More" Project. *Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*., accessed at <https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/resources/ntnmStateCaseStudies.pdf>

³⁸ Pusser, Brian & Breneman, David & Gansneder, Bruce & Kohl, Kay & Levin, John & Milam, John & Turner, Sarah. (2007). Returning to Learning: Adults' Success in College is Key to America's Future. New Agenda Series. Lumina Foundation for Education.

³⁹ Keith, P. M. (2007). Barriers and nontraditional students' use of academic and social services. *College Student Journal*, 41(4), 1123-1128.

Academic

Adults may encounter several academic challenges when returning to education. For instance, they may feel underprepared academically, particularly if there's been a significant gap since their last educational experience.⁴⁰



The rise of online learning has also introduced the challenge of digital literacy, with some adult learners struggling to adapt to new technologies and online learning platforms.⁴¹ Furthermore, many institutions lack sufficient recognition of prior learning, which can be a deterrent for adults considering returning to education.⁴² Note, recognition of prior learning applies to learning that has occurred both within and outside of the classroom (e.g., knowledge and skills gained in the workplace).

⁴⁰ Kasworm, C. E. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(2), 143-160. Accessed at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0741713609336110>

⁴¹ Selwyn, N. (2016). *Education and technology: Key issues and debates*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁴² Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (2000). *Serving adult learners in higher education: Principles of effectiveness*.

Behavioral & Mental Health

Adult learners often face a host of psychological and social challenges. These may include feelings of isolation, especially if they perceive that they don't fit the typical student profile, as well as anxiety and fear about returning to school after a long absence.⁴³

According to Gallup and the Lumina Foundation, 30% and 28% of unenrolled adults report emotional stress or personal mental health issues, respectively, as very important reasons they are not currently enrolled in higher education.⁴⁴ This is also demonstrated in a report by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), which shows nearly 1 in 4 adults express a lack of confidence in postsecondary acceptance or success.⁴⁵ Lastly, imposter syndrome, a psychological pattern where individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being exposed as a fraud, can also be a significant issue for adult learners.⁴⁶ These factors can impede their progress and academic performance.

⁴³ Ross-Gordon, J. M. (2011). Research on adult learners: Supporting the needs of a student population that is no longer nontraditional. Accessed at <https://ir.vnulib.edu.vn/bitstream/123456789/4185/1/4.%20Reseach%20on%20Adult%20Learners.pdf>

⁴⁴ See the latest State of Higher Education report by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation at <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/468986/state-of-higher-education.aspx>

⁴⁵ Darnell, B. (2022). "It's a Little Stressful When I Think of It...": Results of a National Survey and Interviews with Never-Enrolled Adults on the Factors That Drive Them to Consider Postsecondary Education and the Barriers to Enrollment. A CAEL Research Brief. *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning*.

⁴⁶ Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, research & practice*, 15(3), 241. Accessed at https://www.womeninanesesthesiology.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf

Specific Needs

IMMIGRANTS

Adult immigrants seeking postsecondary education can face a unique set of challenges and barriers, and many of them may compound upon the challenges faced by other adult learners.

First, adult immigrants may face language and cultural barriers. If English isn't their first language, immigrants may have difficulty understanding lectures, participating in class discussions, and completing assignments. They might also struggle with academic English, which can be quite different from conversational English.⁴⁷ In addition, immigrants may encounter cultural barriers, such as differing educational expectations and norms, or a lack of familiarity with the U.S. education system. They may also experience social isolation or difficulty in adapting to a new culture.⁴⁸

Financial barriers may also play a significant role. In Michigan, there is no uniform policy for what tuition rate immigrants will pay — in-state, out-of-state, or international. Because these policies vary by school, immigrant students face uncertainty as to how much their program would cost. Furthermore, many immigrants are ineligible for certain types of financial aid, especially if they're undocumented.⁴⁹ They can, however, complete the FAFSA — a long and complex form — to use for private scholarship applications, which they must seek out and apply for independently.

⁴⁷ Chiswick, B. R., & Miller, P. W. (2005). Linguistic distance: A quantitative measure of the distance between English and other languages. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 26(1), 1-11.

⁴⁸ Ngo, B., & Lee, S. J. (2007). Complicating the image of model minority success: A review of Southeast Asian American education. *Review of educational research*, 77(4), 415-453.

⁴⁹ Olivas, M. A. (2009). The political economy of the DREAM Act and the legislative process: A case study of comprehensive immigration reform. *Wayne L. Rev.*, 55, 1757.

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

Individuals with learning and physical disabilities also face unique barriers to earning a postsecondary credential. Students with disabilities can experience feelings of isolation or exclusion, and they may be less likely to participate in social activities or extracurriculars.⁵⁰ This lack of engagement can impact their overall college experience and may affect their academic performance.

Beyond barriers related to behavioral and mental health, students with special educational needs require accommodations, both related to academics and accessibility. Adults with learning disabilities may struggle with traditional instructional methods. They often benefit from accommodations such as extended time on tests, note-taking assistance, or alternative forms of assessment. However, they may encounter difficulty in obtaining these accommodations, especially if their disability is not immediately apparent or if they're uncomfortable disclosing it.⁵¹ Lastly, faculty and staff may lack training to effectively support students with disabilities, leading to unintentional barriers to their learning.⁵²

It is important to note adults with learning disabilities face many of the same challenges as every adult learner as previously discussed — family obligations, work, etc. The impact of these barriers is compounded for students with learning disabilities, as they often require additional accommodation or face extenuating circumstances related to the nature of their individual need.

⁵⁰ Cortiella, C., & Horowitz, S. H. (2014). The state of learning disabilities: Facts, trends and emerging issues. *New York: National center for learning disabilities*, 25(3), 2-45.

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² Hong, B. S. (2015). Qualitative analysis of the barriers college students with disabilities experience in higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(3), 209-226.



06

PROMISING
STRATEGIES
FOR ADULT
ENROLLMENT
& DEGREE
COMPLETION

Key Strategies

In this section, we describe promising strategies used at higher education institutions or at the state level to improve postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion among adult learners. We identify seven categories, summarize individual strategies, and provide examples where possible.

Briefly, we note here the importance of the following strategies to consider and include learner-centered approaches. Learner-centered approaches in education prioritize the needs, experiences, and learning styles of students, instead of employing a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction and support. This approach is particularly relevant for adult learners, who often bring a wealth of life and work experiences to their learning.

Successful programs that promote adult enrollment, persistence, and completion utilize many of these strategies in combination. While each strategy has its merits, implementing them in combination addresses many of the barriers that impede success. Following are detailed descriptions on these strategies and examples of several model programs with demonstrated success. We end the section with brief overviews of state-level initiatives centered on improving academic outcomes for adults.



PROMOTE AWARENESS OF OPPORTUNITY



ENSURE EASE OF ACCESS



ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO TRANSFER



RECOGNIZE PRIOR LEARNING AND COMPETENCY



PROVIDE ACCESS TO A WIDE-RANGING SUITE OF SUPPORT SERVICES



IMPLEMENT GUIDED, CAREER-ALIGNED PATHWAYS



LEVERAGE HIGH QUALITY DATA TO MONITOR PROGRESS AND REFINE PROGRAMS

Strategy Details



PROMOTE AWARENESS OF OPPORTUNITY

Conduct intentional outreach.

Adult learners can pursue education only if they are aware of the programs and services available to them.

Michigan institutions have an opportunity to significantly improve awareness of and access to postsecondary education through broad outreach efforts showcasing the value of additional education and certification, paired with targeted outreach to potential adult learners.

First, broad communication strategies (e.g., media campaigns, advertisements, etc.) ensure the public has access to a baseline set of information regarding postsecondary opportunities and their benefits. Broad communication — as opposed to targeted outreach — aids in re-engaging “hard to find” adult learners, those who may not be seeking additional training but stand to benefit. Identifying the best media through which to conduct this outreach requires market research specific to the provider and the audience they are trying to reach.

The expansion and improvement of data systems, both within and external to education, provide opportunities to conduct targeted outreach to individual adults who are more likely to engage in and benefit from additional education. Targeted outreach can be used to encourage adults to enter or return to postsecondary programs and to provide supports to those currently enrolled. For example, individual communication is a common element of successful state programs seeking to increase adult enrollment. Additionally, researchers found that attrition rates declined when adult students are provided quick information through text messages offering support, encouragement, and details on support resources. Low-touch strategies (“nudges”) tend to be effective, particularly when emphasizing procedural needs.⁵³

⁵³ Page, L. C., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 4-22., accessed at https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21781/w21781.pdf



ENSURE EASE OF ACCESS

Flexible scheduling.

Flexibility within higher education has historically led to increased participation of adult learners.

With the advent of online learning, programs of higher education saw a significant influx of adult students, largely due to the flexibility with which students could attend courses.⁵⁴ Not only should flexible scheduling of programs ensure time-constrained students can access all necessary courses, but access to support services (e.g., advising, financial aid support) should be made flexible as well.⁵⁵ Both coursework and support services should include synchronous and asynchronous options to ensure wide availability.

As an example, flexible scheduling is a core component of the Adult Learner Initiatives within the University of North Carolina (UNC) system.⁵⁶ Not only does flexibility apply to the timing of courses, but [UNC's Adult Learner Initiatives](#) provide flexible modalities (e.g., online learning), program designs (e.g., seven- and eight-week courses), and content (e.g., competency-based education). Additional examples of flexible scheduling within the UNC system include part-time classroom studies at UNC Chapel Hill, Aggies at the Goal Line, and The Finish Line at Western Carolina University. Other postsecondary institutions are increasingly offering flexible course schedules and online degree programs as well. For instance, Arizona State University offers more than 300 degree programs that can be taken completely online.

Accelerated degree programs.

Accelerated degree programs offer a faster-paced, flexible, and efficient educational experience.

These programs can help address the barriers adult learners face in postsecondary education. By condensing course sessions and allowing students to progress more quickly, these programs reduce the time and financial commitment required for degree completion. They often incorporate prior learning assessments, flexible learning formats, and cohort-based learning, making it easier for adult learners to balance their education with work, family, and personal responsibilities while maintaining momentum in their studies.

These programs — for instance, the [Adult Accelerated Degree Completion Program](#) at Grand Valley State University⁵⁷ — can significantly benefit adult learners by shortening the time required to complete a degree, leading to faster career advancement and increased earning potential. By overcoming time and financial constraints, maintaining engagement and motivation, and offering a supportive learning environment, accelerated degree programs empower adult learners to achieve their educational and career goals more rapidly, ultimately promoting postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion.

⁵⁴ Remenick, L. (2019). Services and support for nontraditional students in higher education: A historical literature review. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 25(1), 113-130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971419842880>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Learn more about adult learner initiatives within the UNC system at <https://www.northcarolina.edu/project-kitty-hawk/>

⁵⁷ Learn more about Grand Valley State University's Adult Accelerated Degree Completion Program at <https://www.gvsu.edu/complete/>



ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO TRANSFER

Seamless transfer of credits.

For many adults who have begun but did not finish a postsecondary program, returning to complete their education or training is complicated and time-consuming.

Adults may no longer live near the institution with the program they attended, and courses they completed might not transfer to nearby schools. With simplified transfer processes, adults may be more inclined to leverage the credits previously earned and complete an applicable degree or training program.

To address this, institutions may take part in a reverse transfer program, through which credits earned at a four-year university are used to fulfill requirements for an associate degree at a community college. A national reverse transfer system is conducted through the National Student Clearinghouse and, as of January 2023, 3,652 postsecondary institutions participate. Using reverse transfer, adults can receive a degree using credits previously earned, or alternatively they can shorten their pathway to complete an associate degree program.

In addition to reverse transfer programs, encouraging and simplifying transfer between all postsecondary institutions serves to ease barriers to completion for adult learners. For example, in a collaborative effort between the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA), the Michigan Association of State Universities (MASU), and the Michigan Independent Colleges and Universities (MICU), the MiTransfer Pathways initiative creates a more seamless and efficient transfer experience for students, ultimately promoting degree completion and student success. MiTransfer Pathways promotes success through four key aspects: (1) transfer agreements that establish clear pathways for credit transfer; (2) course equivalencies to ensure students have confidence the classes they take will count toward their intended major when they transfer; (3) collaboration between community colleges and four-year institutions in Michigan, encouraging them to work together to develop and implement transfer pathways that benefit students; and (4) continuous improvement to ensure the project adequately addresses challenges and refines strategies as needed.



RECOGNIZE PRIOR LEARNING AND COMPETENCY

Prior learning assessments.

Prior learning assessments offer a means to evaluate and award academic credit for knowledge and skills adult learners have gained outside of traditional classroom settings.

Prior learning assessments (PLAs) can be acquired through work, volunteer experiences, military service, or self-directed learning. By recognizing and validating the value of these experiences, PLAs can shorten the path adults need to take to receive a postsecondary credential.

By awarding credit for existing knowledge and skills, PLAs can make education more accessible and affordable. With acknowledgment of the value of their prior experiences, adult learners may feel more motivated and engaged in their studies, thus improving their persistence. In addition, PLAs can help adult learners avoid redundant coursework, enabling them to focus on new learning opportunities and advance more quickly toward their education and career goals.

Competency-based education.

Competency-based education is an innovative approach to learning that focuses on the mastery of specific skills and knowledge, rather than traditional time-based measures such as credit hours or semesters.

Competency-based education (CBE) allows adult learners to progress at their own pace, demonstrating their proficiency in each competency as they move through their educational program.

This approach can help adult learners overcome barriers to enrollment, persistence, and completion in postsecondary education by offering flexibility, personalization, and a direct link to relevant career skills. CBE enables adult learners to leverage their existing knowledge and experience, reducing the time and financial commitment required for degree completion. By allowing learners to focus on acquiring new skills and knowledge, CBE fosters engagement, motivation, and persistence. Ultimately, CBE supports adult learners in achieving their educational and career goals more efficiently and effectively, promoting postsecondary success among this population. Western Governors University promotes its [CBE program](#) as efficient, flexible, individualized, and supportive.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ CBE at WGU is detailed on the university's website, here: <https://www.wgu.edu/student-experience/learning/how.html>



PROVIDE ACCESS TO A WIDE-RANGING SUITE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

Basic needs support.

As is the case for all students, adult learners require support – both in and outside of the classroom.

These support systems begin with ensuring students are secure in their basic needs. Using responses from the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, the Hope Center at Temple University found that nearly 60% of college students faced basic needs insecurity.⁵⁹ Basic needs insecurity encompasses many issues, including food insecurity, in which the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food is limited or uncertain; housing insecurity, which encompasses a broad set of challenges that prevent safe, affordable, and consistent housing; and homelessness, under which an individual does not have a place to live. Basic needs insecurity is higher within community colleges and among part-time students, both of which have higher concentrations of adult learners. Postsecondary institutions can aid students in meeting these needs – for instance, by maintaining a food pantry or providing subsidized student housing.

Proactive advising.

In addition to meeting basic needs, active academic support and proactive advising constitute cornerstones of successful student support systems.

Active academic support aligns with traditional academic coaching and tutoring, although throughout the pandemic this has become increasingly digital, asynchronous, and remote.⁶⁰ This transition is particularly relevant for adult learners, who are more likely to live off campus and have schedules that conflict with the availability of traditional supports. Alongside active academic support, proactive advising, which identifies at-risk students and addresses needs before they become problematic, can serve to keep students in the classroom.

⁵⁹ Information and analysis of the #RealCollege Survey reported by the Hope Center at <https://scholarshare.temple.edu/handle/20.500.12613/6953>

⁶⁰ Support programs synthesized from findings of Complete College America, accessed at <https://completecollege.org/resource/cca-releases-new-report-building-on-completion-gains/>

Corequisite support.

Corequisite support to address remediation needs.

Instead of entering a postsecondary program and taking a series of remedial courses to simply get up to speed, under a corequisite model of support, students enter immediately into courses contributing to their degree while receiving additional supports to ensure success. Institutions that have implemented corequisite support models (e.g., University System of Georgia, City University of New York system), report increased course completion and graduation rates.⁶¹ Additionally, the provision of corequisite support is a requirement for institutions to participate in Michigan Reconnect, signaling broad buy-in for the strategy. An extension of this model, corequisite remediation, provides for students to again enter immediately into degree-path coursework, but also provides additional instruction on remedial content students may be lacking. Students supported by corequisite remediation demonstrate significantly higher quantitative course pass rates and graduation rates.⁶²



IMPLEMENT GUIDED, CAREER-ALIGNED PATHWAYS THROUGH COLLEGE

Guided pathways.

Guided pathways serve as an integrated, institution-wide approach to student success.

They are based on intentionally designed, clear, coherent, and structured educational experiences, informed by available evidence.⁶³ Within the most prominent pathway initiatives, put forth by the American Association of Community Colleges, are four dimensions of essential practices to promote success. Guided pathways simplify students' progress by (1) working with students to identify their education and career goals, (2) guiding them on a clear path to reach those goals, (3) keeping students on their designated path, and (4) monitoring progress. With support from the Michigan Community College Association, the Michigan Center for Student Success has been building a system of guided pathways for colleges in Michigan in an effort to strengthen equitable access to career-aligned postsecondary education.

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² Logue, A. W., Douglas, D., & Watanabe-Rose, M. (2019). Corequisite mathematics remediation: Results over time and in different contexts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 41(3), 294-315.

⁶³ Definition gathered from the American Association of Community Colleges, accessed at <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/12PathwaysModelDescriptionFinal1616.pdf>

Career-aligned degree pathways.

Career-aligned pathways in postsecondary education and training programs provide structured and clearly defined routes for students to acquire the necessary skills and credentials for in-demand careers.

By integrating academic coursework with practical, industry-relevant experiences, these pathways ensure that students are well-prepared for the workforce upon graduation. By offering clear guidance, reducing uncertainty, and demonstrating a direct connection between education and career outcomes, career-aligned pathways can increase motivation, engagement, and persistence among adult learners, ultimately promoting postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion.

Georgia State University (GSU) implemented the guided pathways approach to help students, including adult learners, navigate their academic journey more efficiently. This approach simplifies the course selection process by offering well-defined program maps that outline the specific courses needed to complete a degree within a suggested time frame. GSU's guided pathways system also includes proactive advising, which ensures students receive consistent guidance throughout their academic journey. This approach helps adult learners balance their education with other responsibilities, such as work and family commitments, by providing clear expectations and support for degree completion.

Corporate partnership programs.

Corporate partnership programs involve an institution of higher education forming a partnership with local, regional, or national businesses to facilitate education and training programs for current or potential employees.

These programs can tailor education to the needs of the industry, while businesses offer flexibility to employees to spend time receiving additional training. In addition, these partnerships can be included in a career-driven guided pathway, offering students opportunities to explore the functions and responsibilities of a potential career. Such a program may ease time constraints faced by working adults who seek training directly relevant to their occupation.

As these programs develop, it is crucial to engage a range of industry employers, both to broaden the scope of available opportunities and build up the relationship between postsecondary education and community needs. These programs are increasingly common within community colleges, with Lansing Community College, Grand Rapids Community College, and Washtenaw Community College all serving as examples of Michigan community colleges working closely with local business partners.



LEVERAGE HIGH QUALITY DATA TO MONITOR PROGRESS AND ADJUST SERVICES

Student success dashboards.

Data-driven insights enable institutions to identify at-risk students, target interventions, and allocate resources more effectively.

By analyzing factors such as demographics, course enrollment patterns, and academic performance, institutions can develop tailored support services and personalized learning experiences that address the unique needs of adult learners. In addition, data can be used to inform the design of flexible, career-aligned pathways and to evaluate the effectiveness of various initiatives, ultimately contributing to the continuous improvement of postsecondary programs and promoting success among adult learners.

As an example, California State Universities (CSU) and Cal-PASS Plus — a statewide data system that collects, analyzes, and shares information on student progress throughout the education system, from kindergarten through higher education and into the workforce — have been working together to promote success among adult learners. Through this partnership, CSU identifies trends and gaps in student performance, enabling them to develop targeted interventions and support services for adult learners.

In Michigan, the Oakland University Student Success and Equity Dashboard serves as an example of how institutions can leverage data to identify trends, gaps, and areas for improvement in academic outcomes for students. The dashboard is designed to be used by faculty, staff, and administrators to identify and develop systems changes to support populations that are struggling to complete. For example, Oakland University can look at specific courses that serve as barriers to completion and develop strategies to improve success without reducing rigor. The dashboard can cross-reference data to key demographics to help better understand if certain populations face barriers in specific areas compared to others.

Model Programs

ACCELERATED STUDY IN ASSOCIATE PROGRAMS (ASAP) AT THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

The CUNY ASAP program is an innovative initiative designed to increase associate degree completion rates among community college students by addressing financial, academic, and personal barriers. In a review of the impact of the ASAP program, research corporation MDRC found the program nearly doubled graduation rates for participating students relative to non-ASAP students.⁶⁴ Key elements contributing to ASAP's success include:

- 1. Comprehensive Financial Support:** ASAP covers any tuition gaps that are not met by financial aid, essentially offering students a tuition-free experience. The program also provides free use of textbooks and a monthly MetroCard for transportation.
- 2. Academic Support:** ASAP students receive personalized academic and career advising to help them stay on track for graduation. They also have access to tutoring and other academic resources to support their success.
- 3. Cohort Model:** Students in the ASAP program are placed in cohorts, taking classes together and forming a supportive learning community. This model promotes a sense of belonging and encourages peer support.
- 4. Block Scheduling:** ASAP students are provided with block scheduling, ensuring that they have a predictable and consistent class schedule. This allows students to better plan their lives around work, family, and other responsibilities.
- 5. Career Development:** The program offers career development services, such as resume and interview assistance, internships, and job placement support, to prepare students for the workforce upon graduation.
- 6. Full-time Enrollment:** ASAP students are required to enroll full-time, accelerating their progress toward degree completion. The program aims to help students graduate within three years, faster than the average community college completion timeline.

⁶⁴ Scrivener, S., Weiss, M. J., Rattledge, A., Rudd, T., Sommo, C., & Fresques, H. (2015). Three-year effect of CUNY's accelerated study in associate programs (ASAP) for developmental education students. *MDRC*.

ADULT ACCELERATED DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM AT GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

The Adult Accelerated Degree Completion Program at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) provides a flexible and convenient option for working adults who wish to complete their bachelor's degree, advance their careers, or transition to a new field. The program is offered through GVSU's Center for Adult and Continuing Studies.

Key features of the Adult Accelerated Degree Completion Program at GVSU include:

- 1. Accelerated Format:** The program is structured to help adult learners complete their degree more quickly than through traditional formats. Courses are typically offered in shorter, intensive sessions, allowing students to progress through the program at an accelerated pace.
- 2. Flexible Scheduling:** To accommodate the busy schedules of working adults, the Adult Accelerated Degree Completion Program offers courses in various formats, such as evening, weekend, and online classes. This flexibility enables students to balance their education with work and family commitments.
- 3. Degree Options:** GVSU's Adult Accelerated Degree Completion Program currently offers a Bachelor of Science in Integrative Studies. This interdisciplinary degree allows students to customize their program of study based on their personal and professional interests, drawing from a variety of disciplines across the university.
- 4. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA):** GVSU recognizes that adult learners may have acquired valuable knowledge and skills through work, volunteering, military service, or other life experiences. The program offers the opportunity for students to earn credit for prior learning, potentially reducing the time and cost required to complete their degree.
- 5. Support Services:** GVSU's Center for Adult and Continuing Studies provides various support services for adult learners, including academic advising, career counseling, and financial aid assistance. These resources help adult students navigate the challenges of returning to school and ensure they have the support needed to succeed in their academic and professional pursuits.

As of fall 2020, the Adult Accelerated Degree Completion Program had completed seven cohorts in more than 100 course sections, with a 70% retention rate. Of those who completed the program, 100% met their professional goals, 86% received a pay raise, and 73% received a promotion.

PROJECT WIN-WIN, LED BY THE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY⁶⁵

Project Win-Win was an initiative led by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) in partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and funded by the Lumina Foundation. The project, which took place between 2010 and 2013, aimed to address the issue of “near-completers” — students who had earned enough credits for an associate degree but had not received one, either because they dropped out or transferred to a four-year institution without obtaining the degree first.

Project Win-Win sought to identify and assist these near-completers in two ways:

- 1. Awarding retroactive degrees:** Participating institutions worked to identify former students who had already earned enough credits for an associate degree but did not receive one. These institutions then awarded retroactive degrees to eligible students, ensuring they received the credentials they had earned.
- 2. Re-enrollment and degree completion:** For students who were just a few credits shy of earning an associate degree, institutions reached out to encourage re-enrollment and provided support to help them complete their remaining requirements.

Project Win-Win involved 61 participating colleges and universities across nine states (Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Virginia, and Wisconsin). The project identified over 6,700 students eligible for retroactive degrees and more than 20,000 students who were close to degree completion. As a result, over 4,500 associate degrees were awarded retroactively, and many other students were re-enrolled and supported in their efforts to complete their degrees.

The key lessons from Project Win-Win include the importance of data-driven approaches to identify students who can benefit from targeted interventions, the value of inter-institutional collaboration, and the potential impact of relatively low-cost efforts to improve degree completion rates. The project demonstrated that targeted interventions help individuals obtain the credentials they deserve, which leads to better employment opportunities and contributes to closing the skills gap in the workforce.

Beginning in 2018, IHEP has been building upon the lessons learned from Project Win-Win and implementing the [Degrees When Due](#) (DWD) initiative. Through DWD, institutions leverage data mining and degree auditing to address equity gaps in degree completion and pursue efforts to reengage adults who may be inclined to stop before completing their program. Though evidence on the efficacy of the program is still being collected and analyzed, the program highlights the importance of learning from prior initiatives and emphasizing the use of high-quality, data-driven strategies to recruit and retain adult learners.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Information on Project Win-Win gathered from <https://www.ihep.org/initiative/project-win-win/>

⁶⁶ Learn more about Degrees When Due at <https://www.ihep.org/initiative/degrees-when-due/>

WARRIOR WAY BACK AT WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

The Warrior Way Back program was created to help former students who left the university with outstanding balances return and complete their degrees. This innovative debt forgiveness initiative aims to eliminate the financial barriers that often prevent students from re-enrolling and finishing their education.

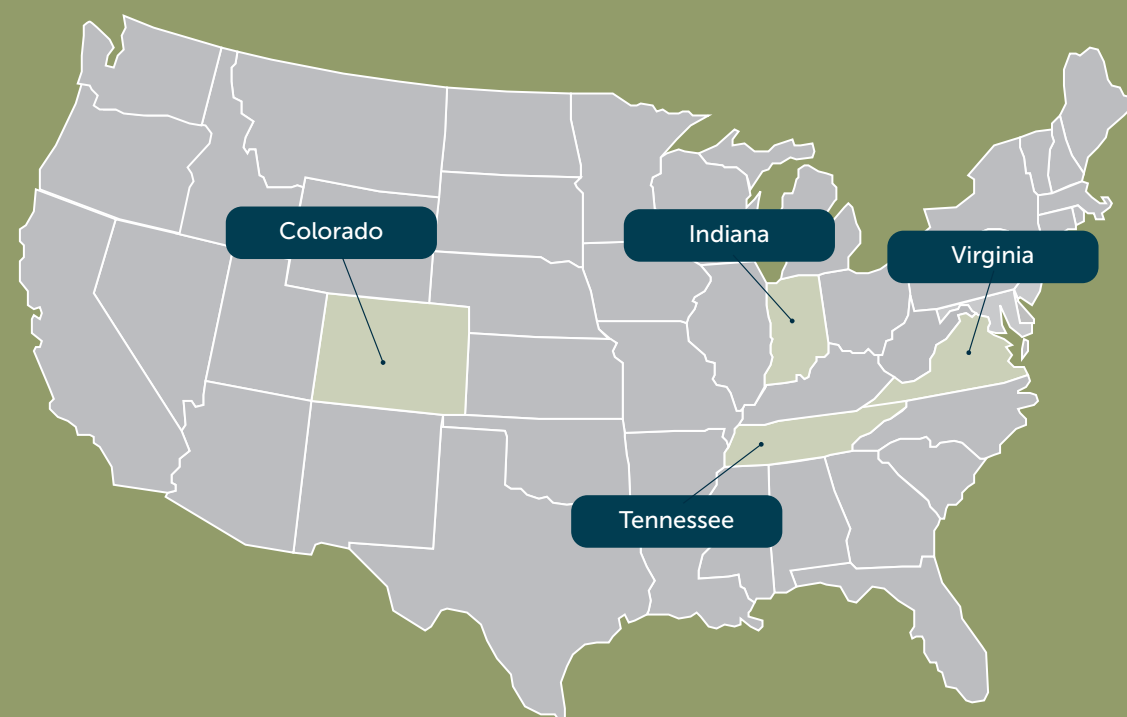
Former Wayne State University students who left the university within the past 10 years with an outstanding balance of less than \$1,500 are eligible to apply for the program. If interested, students must complete an application to re-enroll. Once accepted to the program, students can have up to \$1,500 of their outstanding debt forgiven. The debt is forgiven incrementally as students make progress toward their degrees. For each semester the student completes with satisfactory academic performance (2.0 GPA or higher), one-third of their outstanding balance will be forgiven. Under this structure, students have an ongoing incentive to continue their education. Paired with access to support services (e.g., academic advising, career services, and financial literacy resources), they have help in achieving their educational goals.

As of February 2020, 142 students had enrolled in Warrior Way Back, and 30 had graduated or were expected to graduate in fall 2019. Those enrolled in the program were largely high need students (60%) or students of color (80%). In addition to the academic success of the program, Wayne State University has calculated the return on investment from the program at 74%, signaling strong economic benefits to the institution.

State Initiatives

Since the passage of WIOA, states have been implementing various initiatives targeted at aligning workforce training – including postsecondary degree and training programs – to the needs of the labor market.

Many of these programs, including Michigan Reconnect, are specifically targeted at bringing adults back into education and training programs. Here we provide examples of state-level initiatives that support adults in acquiring additional degrees, certifications, or credentials while promoting workforce development.



Monitoring Examples

The list presented on the following pages is not exhaustive but provides examples of state investments in adult learners and workforce development. Other examples of states that have introduced workforce development programs include Minnesota (Minnesota Reconnect), Arkansas (Arkansas Future Grant), and Mississippi (Complete 2 Compete). States are increasingly working to improve the economic conditions within their local communities by passing workforce development legislation. The Center can look to these programs as evidence that supporting adults in postsecondary degree or credential attainment leads to economic benefits for the individual and the broader labor market in Michigan.

Examples of state-level initiatives supporting returning adults.

TENNESSEE – TENNESSEE RECONNECT⁶⁷

Like the similarly named Michigan initiative, Tennessee Reconnect is a last-dollar grant program that pays remaining tuition costs (and mandatory fees) for eligible adults pursuing an associate degree, technical degree, or technical diploma at a community college or technical college within the state. Launching in the fall of 2018, Tennessee Reconnect had 91,000 applications in its first three years, with 32,000 becoming Reconnect students.⁶⁸

Tennessee Reconnect students were more likely to receive associate degrees, workforce-ready credentials, and high-needs credentials than their peers.⁶⁹ However, Tennessee Reconnect cohorts have been shrinking over time, as applicants struggle to complete initial requirements and maintain program eligibility. Fewer than half of students who lost Reconnect eligibility remained enrolled in college. To stop this decline, participating schools have implemented “nudge” reminder programs and flexible scheduling, directly addressing barriers identified in a statewide survey to program administrators.⁷⁰

COLORADO – FINISH WHAT YOU STARTED⁷¹

In 2021, the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative launched Finish What You Started, a program encouraging state residents to return to school and complete a degree or workforce certificate. In addition to financial support to return or enter a postsecondary program, students also can receive enrollment support (e.g., application writing, transcript preparation), connection to on- and off-campus resources for academic, social, and personal needs, one-to-one student navigation assistance, and aid in transitioning from postsecondary education to the workforce. As the program has recently completed its first year, an evaluation reporting on program participation and success is not yet available.

The comprehensive nature of the program limits financial barriers as well as barriers tied to access and awareness.

⁶⁷ Learn more about Tennessee Reconnect at <https://tnreconnect.gov/>

⁶⁸ Data gathered from the grant evaluation report summary at <https://comptroller.tn.gov/content/dam/cot/orea/advanced-search/2022/ReconnectExecSumm.pdf>

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ Learn more about Finish What You Started at <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/finish-what-you-started-participant>

VIRGINIA – NEW ECONOMY WORKFORCE CREDENTIAL GRANT PROGRAM⁷²

Virginia’s New Economy Workforce Credential Grant (NEWC) Program, established in 2016, is primarily designed to support Virginians in the acquisition of a noncredit workforce credential specifically tied to high-demand fields in the state. This program differs slightly from others mentioned because financial support is dependent on program completion. Eligibility also is strictly limited to programs aligned to high-demand fields identified by the Virginia Board for Workforce Development.

Implementation of the NEWC program led to increased enrollments in participating institutions year over year, with the largest increase occurring in FY 2021.⁷³ The majority of program enrollees (n = 6,151; 72%) earned a credential, though equity concerns remain as Black and Hispanic students were less likely to complete the process. The annual reporting tied to the NEWC program tracks changes in earnings for participants as well. Among students completing the program, median annual wages increased 31%, or \$7,000. Students in the bottom quartile of pre-program wages saw the highest increase, showing that workforce development programs offer meaningful increases for economic mobility.⁷⁴

INDIANA – NEXT LEVEL JOBS⁷⁵

Since 2017, Indiana’s Next Level Jobs initiative supports state residents with free training in high-growth, in-demand jobs in the state through workforce ready grants. These grants mitigate costs for students, as well as employers willing to train new employees. Nearly 50,000 Indiana residents have either completed a certificate or received employee training through this program.⁷⁶ For FY 2021, 8,000 students earned a certificate in a high-demand field through the program, and nearly 12,000 employees received additional training. Importantly, participants have seen an average wage gain of \$6,800 for certificate earners and \$5,900 for those who received additional training.

⁷² Learn more about the New Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program at <https://www.schev.edu/institutions/grants/new-economy-workforce-credential>

⁷³ NEWCG evaluation found at <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2022/RD128/PDF>

⁷⁴ *ibid*

⁷⁵ Learn more about Next Level Jobs at <https://nextleveljobs.org/>

⁷⁶ Next Level Jobs program evaluation found at https://cdn.nextleveljobs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021_NLJ_One-Pager.pdf



07

KEY LEARNINGS
& NEXT STEPS

Next Steps

The adult education landscape is vast and varied. This applies to the services offered, the information and research available, the supports needed for higher education institutions, and the adult learner population.

In this review of the adult education landscape, we investigated the definition of adult learning, reviewed the current state of adult learning in Michigan, identified barriers inhibiting adults from pursuing higher education, and explored promising strategies that states, institutions, and organizations are using to mitigate those barriers. From this research, we draw several key recommendations:

CLEARLY IDENTIFY MICHIGAN'S ADULT LEARNER POPULATION AND THE SPECIFIC BARRIERS THEY FACE TO POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AND COMPLETION.

1

Identifying and understanding the target population for initiatives led by The Michigan Center for Adult College Success is the first step in ensuring the Center achieves its goals. This landscape analysis provides a cursory overview of who adult learners are and the challenges they face. To truly understand how to best serve adults in Michigan, we need a more detailed understanding of this population and the challenges they face.

The Center will develop a more thorough profile of adults without a postsecondary credential in Michigan and what prevents them from enrolling in postsecondary education. This will include identifying the most common challenges and barriers they face to completion after they enroll. Specifically, part-time attendance is a significant barrier to completion, particularly within targeted graduation rate timelines (e.g., 150% or 200% of "normal" time). The state of Michigan does not currently collect success rate data by enrollment status, so we cannot currently estimate how various Michigan institutions are faring when it comes to part- versus full-time learners.

The state of Michigan does collect a significant amount of data, however, on the education progress of individuals. Although this data is not publicly available, the Center can seek a partnership with the state to obtain access. Successful state adult education initiatives often pair state-level data with additional economic data and research by private organizations to fill in the gaps that might exist in the public data.

Lastly, the Center will need to engage directly with the adult population to get a better understanding of the barriers to enrollment and completion.

These data, combined with a clear definition of whom the Center serves, will allow the Center to establish the foundations for outreach to potential adult learners and how to tailor best practices for Michigan postsecondary institutions.

DEVELOP A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THE LOCAL CONTEXT RELEVANT TO THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUAL ADULT LEARNERS.

2

Local context plays a significant role in the success of education interventions, particularly those with theory-driven design.⁷⁷ As the Center develops its portfolio of services and supports, it must strive to thoroughly understand and evolve to meet the needs of the communities it is serving. Given the diverse geography and demographics across Michigan, truly understanding the local context will allow the Center to further tailor best practices for a postsecondary institution to the adult learner population they are trying to serve. The Center should seek to understand questions such as:

1. What are the skills and areas of knowledge most in demand?
2. What are the deficits in local skills and knowledge necessary to fill gaps in the workforce?
3. What are the unique challenges to adult learners enrolling and completing their credentials?
4. What types of institutions are in the area and available to provide services?

By answering these questions, the Center can align its services and supports to institutions that are in the area and that also align to the workforce and labor needs. This alignment can bolster and better provide a holistic yet contextual approach to meet the needs of the individual adult learners as well as potential employers.

COMPLETE A DETAILED REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF MICHIGAN EFFORTS TO IMPLEMENT BEST PRACTICES.

3

Only a few of the numerous efforts being undertaken by institutions in Michigan are noted in this analysis. The Center will catalog, review and evaluate the efforts being taken by postsecondary institutions across the state in order to help share what works with other institutions and partner to improve existing efforts.

Michigan's postsecondary governance structure creates an environment that results in multiple experiments and efforts by individual institutions to improve their individual institution. However, this makes the sharing, scaling and implementation across the entire postsecondary system much more challenging. The Center will play a key role in addressing this challenge by compiling the work being done at the individual institutions, evaluating the impact of these efforts and the learnings from the individual efforts into one accessible resource to all of Michigan's postsecondary institutions. The Center will take an active role in sharing and disseminating the information and learning across the entire Michigan postsecondary system.

⁷⁷ Design-Based Research: An Emerging Paradigm for Educational Inquiry. (2003). *Educational Researcher*, 32(1), 5–8. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032001005>

DEVELOP VALUE-ADDED BEST PRACTICES TAILORED TO MICHIGAN POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS.

4

Building on the work laid out in the previous steps, the Center can learn from each institution's efforts to implement best practices, the needs of adult learners from both a statewide and localized perspective, and nationally identified best practices. These findings will inform development of statewide guidance on how other Michigan postsecondary institutions can tailor these best practices to be implemented.

The Center will provide high-level information on effective best practices in an accessible format, as well as direct support through individualized resources for postsecondary institutions that are looking to implement best practices to serve their adult learners.

IDENTIFY AND PROCURE RESOURCES TO SUPPORT EFFORTS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICES AT MICHIGAN POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS.

5

Effectuating systemwide changes to better serve adult learners in Michigan's postsecondary institutions will take financial and human resources, especially given Michigan's unique postsecondary structure. In partnership with the state, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and postsecondary institutions, the Center will work to identify resources to develop, implement and evaluate best practices to better serve adult learners and improve enrollment and completion.

Here we also note that the implementation of best practices takes a significant commitment of time, resources, and effort. Simply put, these changes cannot happen overnight. Furthermore, additional time will be necessary to evaluate the success of any changes. The state of Michigan, institutions, and partner organizations should manage expectations for the speed at which we observe meaningful, sustainable change.

The implementation of best practices takes a significant commitment of time, resources, and effort. Simply put, these changes cannot happen overnight.

PROVIDE BOTH TARGETED INFORMATION AND BROAD OUTREACH TO POTENTIAL ADULT LEARNERS.

6

Given the low percentage of adults without a postsecondary credential, it is clear that many adults either do not see the value of obtaining a postsecondary credential or believe the barriers they face to obtaining a credential are too great to make it worthwhile. The Center will work to clearly identify what is preventing adults from pursuing their postsecondary education and will provide suggested strategies for postsecondary institutions, employers, and the state to engage this population to inspire them to obtain a postsecondary credential.

One of the most significant barriers to adults pursuing additional education is a lack of information about program options, eligibility, and financial aid.⁷⁸ Overcoming this barrier is an effective means to boost enrollment and persistence within higher education^{79, 80}, and is an avenue the Center is well-suited to pursue. Information targeted specifically to potential adult students alongside broad communication campaigns are needed to advance the mission of the Center and, in turn, Michigan's Sixty by 30 strategic plan.

LEVERAGE A 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.

7

Adult education resources and supports are more successful when state agencies, institutions, and employers are aligned on the needs of the workforce and potential students.⁸¹ Through network building and alignment, the Center can ensure (1) potential students have access to the resources and supports they need; (2) potential students have a simple, single point of contact through which they can explore eligible programs; and (3) education and training programs provide skills and knowledge that are immediately applicable to the needs of the local economy. In addition, by aligning employer networks, nonprofit organizations, state efforts, and education institutions, the Center can facilitate discussions through which institutions understand the flexibility necessary to support adult learners.

⁷⁸ Odle, T. K. (2020). Strategies to Support Adult Learners and Some College, No Degree Students "To and Through" a Postsecondary Credential. Accessed at https://www.sree.org/assets/Summer_Fellows_Reports/Executive%20Summary_Literature%20Review_Opportunities.pdf

⁷⁹ Page, L. C., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 4-22., accessed at https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21781/w21781.pdf

⁸⁰ Chande, R., Luca, M., Sanders, M., Soon, X. Z., Borcan, O., Barak Corren, N., ... & Robinson, S. (2015). Curbing adult student attrition: Evidence from a field experiment. *Harvard Business School NOM Unit Working Paper*, (15-065), accessed at <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/14369096/15-065.pdf?sequence=1>

⁸¹ Lane, P., Michelau, D. K., & Palmer, I. (2012). Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the "Non-Traditional No More" Project. *Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*, accessed at www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/resources/ntnmStateCaseStudies.pdf

IMPROVE DATA QUALITY AND TRANSPARENCY

8

The success of adult postsecondary education depends largely on the ability of stakeholders (students, institutions, employers, workforce developers, etc.) to access and understand granular, localized information. Students need access to data to determine which programs might yield the highest return on their investment, based upon current demand and the labor market outcomes of previous graduates. Institutions also need this information to gauge how well their programs are aligned to the needs of local businesses, and to identify gaps in local offerings. Employers need to know which programs produce talent for their jobs and how many graduates they should expect to enter the labor market each year. Communities need to know which populations are being served, and who is being left behind. To this end, the Center will work to provide communities with localized information necessary to help all stakeholders make data-driven decisions.



Get Involved

While Michigan's current completion rates for adult learners are below the national averages and the rates of our neighboring states, there are many reasons 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.


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.

Learn More

More information about resources, including Innovation Investment Awards and consulting, provided by The Michigan Center for Adult College Success, can be found here:

info.talentfirst.net/mcacs




60%
by 2030



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