

Unlocking Michigan's Talent Pipeline

Policy Recommendations from the Reconnect Applicant Survey

January 2026



About This Report

This policy brief was led and authored by the Michigan Center for Adult College Success, which analyzed Michigan Reconnect applicant survey data and developed the policy recommendations outlined in this report. The Center, an initiative of TalentFirst, brought its deep expertise in adult learner success, postsecondary policy, and data-driven reform to ensure its recommendations are grounded in evidence and aligned with national best practices.

This work was made possible through a partnership with the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP), which administers the Reconnect applicant survey and provided access to statewide data, and with support from communications and policy partners who assisted in shaping the report for legislative, institutional, and community audiences.

Together, these partners share a commitment to strengthening Michigan's talent pipeline by removing barriers for adult learners and ensuring that public investments translate into meaningful credential attainment and economic mobility.





Introduction

The Michigan Reconnect scholarship program offers tuition-free or significantly discounted community college education to eligible adults without a college degree. As part of a growing commitment to supporting adult learners, the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP) launched a statewide survey in August 2024 to better understand the needs, experiences, and goals of prospective Reconnect students. Between August 2024 and April 15, 2025, more than 9,400 applicants completed the survey.

This report summarizes five key findings and offers actionable, evidence-based policy recommendations for state legislators, institutional leaders, and community partners.

These recommendations are grounded in the lived experiences of Michigan adults who are motivated to return to education while navigating complex systems and structural constraints. They also reflect national best practices and policy guidance from the field of adult and post-traditional education.



Recommendations Overview



Build Seamless Pathways to Degrees and Careers

- Strengthen articulation agreements and statewide transfer pathways for adult learners; ensure transparent cost information.
- Align degree maps from certificates to associate and bachelor's degrees; include transparent estimates of tuition and aid options post-Reconnect scholarship.
- Embed early career-aligned advising tied to financial planning for transfer.



Expand Holistic Student Supports

- Expand partnerships to address housing, food, mental health, and other basic needs and align them with the MiLEAP Student Basic Needs Task Force Report.
- Create adult-focused support navigators integrated with campus basic needs hubs.
- Build coordinated, non-overlapping referral systems connecting students to public and community resources.



Recognize and Reward Prior Learning

- Expand and standardize Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) across all community colleges, and encourage institutions to use MiLEAP's CPL reimbursement.
- Establish advisor and faculty training to identify and award CPL consistently.
- Require transparent, streamlined CPL processes at application and enrollment.



Improve Financial and Transfer Navigation

- Embed loan counseling and financial coaching at the community college level.
- Develop transfer exploration modules during onboarding that help students plan beyond their associate degree.
- Equip academic advisors and Reconnect Navigators with clear tools to demystify loan and transfer systems.



Design Flexible, Adult-Centered Learning Models

- Encourage institutions to offer core certificate and degree programs in online and hybrid formats.
- Support the development of modular, evening, and weekend course options.
- Clarify and standardize what "accelerated" means so it's clear to adult learners that these are 7- or 8-week courses.



Build Seamless Pathways to Degrees and Careers



Finding

Reconnect applicants are not only seeking short-term credentials – they are interested in long-term academic and career mobility. Many adult learners view Reconnect as a launching point rather than a final stop in their educational journey. However, the uncertainty around transfer pathways signals a need for stronger infrastructure and communication across institutions. This uncertainty is reinforced by financial concerns, as there is no comparable tuition-free program for most four-year institutions, leaving many adults unsure how they would afford a future transfer.

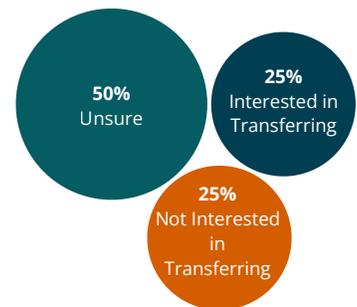
Supporting Data from the Reconnect Survey

Fig. 1, right, suggests that as many as three-quarters of applicants are open to earning a bachelor’s degree, but many encounter fragmented information about pathways and costs across institutions once they leave the Reconnect tuition-free environment.

Fig. 1

Transfer Possibilities

25% are interested in transferring, while another 50% are unsure, demonstrating a large pool of potential transfer students.



Recommendations

- Strengthen articulation agreements and statewide transfer pathways that apply to adult learners and ensure they include clear information about costs and financial implications at each step.
- Ensure that degree maps show clear linkages from certificate to associate to bachelor’s degrees and include transparent estimates of tuition and aid options once students move beyond the Reconnect scholarship.
- Embed career-aligned advising early in the enrollment process to reinforce how credentials connect to career advancement and to proactively discuss the financial planning needed for potential transfer.

Suggested Resource

National Governors Association (2021). *Increasing Postsecondary Credential Attainment: A Guide for State Policy Leaders*



Michigan Examples



GRCC–GVSU Partnership

Grand Rapids Community College and Grand Valley State University offer structured 2+2 and 3+1 transfer pathways with clear advising support for adult learners.



CMU Central Bound

Partnership between Central Michigan University and community colleges across Michigan designed to make earning a bachelor’s degree more flexible, affordable, and convenient.*



Macomb Community College

MCCs Guided Pathways model organizes programs into clear sequences showing how industry-recognized certificates stack into associate degrees aligned with regional workforce needs.



Glen Oaks - Olivet Partnership | GO2UO

Partnership between Glen Oaks Community College and the University of Olivet to streamline adult learners’ pathways to bachelor’s degrees.*

*Program supported by Innovation Investment Award



Recognize and Reward Prior Learning

Finding

Reconnect applicants bring years of workforce and training experience that could count toward a credential. Yet eligibility pathways for prior learning credit are inconsistently communicated across institutions, and CPL processes vary widely across institutions, creating confusion and underutilization. Scaling CPL has the potential to accelerate credential completion and affirm the value of adult learners' professional backgrounds. MiLEAP's [CPL reimbursement policy](#), offered as part of Michigan Reconnect, provides institutions with financial support for each credit hour awarded through CPL, helping offset assessment and administrative costs. Early adopters such as [Schoolcraft College](#) demonstrate how this policy can expand access when implemented intentionally.

Supporting Data from the Reconnect Survey

85% of applicants reported at least one year of work experience, with 61% reporting six or more years. In addition, 26% reported already holding a skills certificate or credential.

Fig. 2

Work Experience



Recommendations

- Expand and standardize the use of Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) across all community colleges and encourage institutions to utilize MiLEAP's CPL reimbursement to reduce cost barriers and scale consistent practices.
- Establish advisor and faculty training to proactively identify CPL opportunities and ensure staff understand how the CPL reimbursement can support assessment and transcription processes.
- Require CPL processes to be transparent, streamlined, and promoted at the point of application with clear communication about the availability of the CPL reimbursement for institutions.

Suggested Resources

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (2020). *The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes*



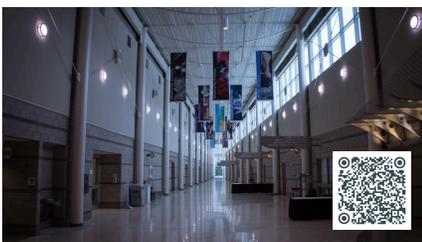
MiLEAP. (2025). *A Report on Credit for Prior Learning Among Michigan Reconnect Students*



Resource on Schoolcraft College



Michigan Examples



Lansing Community College CPL Crosswalks

LCC maintains transparent CPL crosswalks that convert industry certifications and training into academic credit.



Delta College Military & Workforce CPL

Delta College provides streamlined CPL evaluations for veterans and workers with industry-recognized experience.



Jackson College CPL Assessment Center

Jackson College offers a centralized Credit for Prior Learning Assessment Center to guide adult learners through CPL options.*



Design Flexible, Adult-Centered Learning Models



Finding

Most Reconnect applicants are actively employed adults balancing work, caregiving, and professional responsibilities, creating demand for flexible, high-quality learning models. Their schedules are shaped by jobs, caregiving responsibilities, and other adult obligations, requiring programs that can adapt to their lives, not the other way around. A growing preference for online and hybrid formats also reflects the need for predictable, self-paced learning environments.

Supporting Data from the Reconnect Survey

Similar to national trends, respondents had no singular, clear preference for one format over another. However, online (61%) and hybrid (51%) were the most preferred formats,* particularly given respondents' work status, shown in Fig. 3.

Recommendations

- Encourage institutions to offer core certificate and degree programs in online and hybrid formats.
- Support the development of modular, evening, and weekend course options.
- Clarify and standardize what "accelerated" means so it's clear to adult learners that these are 7- or 8-week courses.

Michigan Examples



Washtenaw Community College

Washtenaw Community College offers fast-track, mostly online programs with evening and weekend options, explicitly designed so working adults can train at their own pace while balancing jobs and family responsibilities.



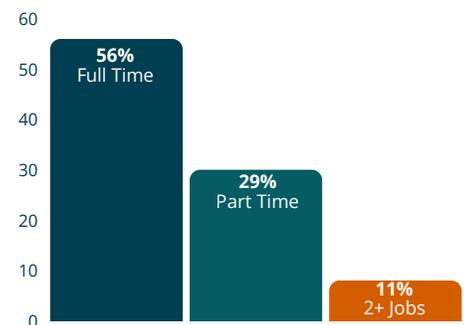
Oakland Community College

Oakland Community College's short-term training programs and certifications provide employer-aligned, accelerated pathways—often 14 weeks or less—that allow adults to quickly gain in-demand skills while leveraging flexible scheduling and workforce funding.

Fig. 3

Work Status

At the time of the survey, a majority of respondents indicated that they would have to balance working with attending college, including 56% that anticipated balancing full-time work, 29% part-time work, and 11% balancing multiple jobs.



Suggested Resource

Lumina Foundation. (2019). *Today's Students: Adult Learners*



*Note: respondents were able to select multiple options.



Expand Holistic Student Supports

Finding

Adult learners navigate complex life responsibilities and structural resource constraints that affect their ability to persist. Many Reconnect applicants experience overlapping structural access gaps in housing stability, health care, nutrition, and caregiving supports. Addressing one barrier in isolation is rarely enough; students need coordinated support systems that respond to the whole person. Recommendations from the MiLEAP Student Basic Needs Task Force reinforce this need, emphasizing statewide strategies to improve access to food, housing, mental health care, child care, and technology supports.

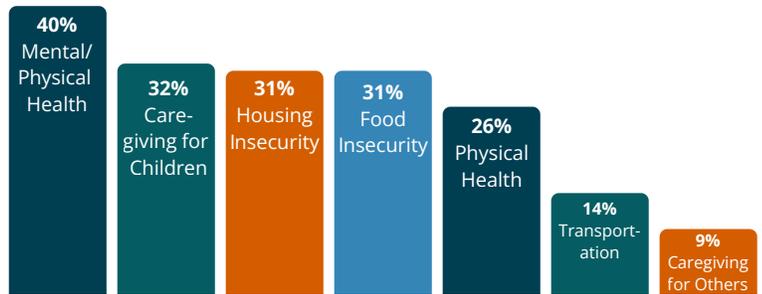
Supporting Data from the Reconnect Survey

Nearly 75% of respondents reported at least one major challenge outside of school, including mental/physical health (40%), caregiving (32%), housing insecurity (31%), and food insecurity (31%).

Fig. 4

Adult Learners Face Many Competing Priorities

Adult learners bring resilience, work experience, and strong motivation to advance their education. However, many juggle demanding responsibilities outside the classroom, and institutions can better support them by addressing key challenges they face. Among adult learners, the most common challenges include:



Recommendations

- Expand partnerships with community-based organizations for housing, food, and mental health supports, and align institutional strategies with the statewide recommendations outlined in the MiLEAP Student Basic Needs Task Force Report.
- Establish wraparound student support navigator positions focused on adult learners and explore integration with campus basic needs hubs and navigator models.
- Build systems that identify overlapping needs and refer students to coordinated supports, such as connecting students to public benefits, emergency housing resources, child care assistance, and mental health services.

Suggested Resources

Achieving the Dream. (2023). Holistic Student Supports Redesign Toolkit



MiLEAP. (2025). Barriers to Bridges: Strengthening Michigan Communities by Addressing College Student Basic Needs



Michigan Examples



Henry Ford College

The SOS Office at Henry Ford College provides emergency aid, personal counseling, and coordinated support services to help students facing food insecurity, housing instability, or financial crises.



GRCC

GRCC's GetHelp program connects students to food access, emergency grants, housing resources, mental health supports, and other local services through a centralized referral system.



Mott Community College

MCC's personalized and collaborative support helps adult students thrive and reach their educational goals.



Muskegon Community College

The Jayhawk Resource Hub at MCC helps adult students with food, transportation and other issues that may inhibit program completion.*



Improve Financial and Transfer Navigation

Finding

Many applicants are navigating complex financial and academic systems without adequate support. Adult learners often encounter fragmented and inconsistent information about loan repayment options, credit transfer agreements, or degree planning tools, which leads to indecision, delay, or attrition. Proactive, plain-language advising is essential to ensure students make informed and confident choices.

Supporting Data from the Reconnect Survey

37.5% of respondents hold federal student loans, and 40.2% of those say they need help navigating loan repayment or deferment. Additionally, 31% were unsure about their expected graduation timeline.

Recommendations

- Embed loan counseling and financial coaching at the community college level.
- Develop modules during onboarding that help students navigate transfer options beyond their associate degree.
- Equip academic advisors and Reconnect Navigators with clear tools to demystify loan and transfer systems.

Michigan Examples



University of Michigan–Flint (UM-Flint)

UM-Flint provides clear transfer pathways and detailed course-equivalency tools to help community college students navigate a seamless transition into bachelor's programs.



Lansing Community College

Lansing Community College provides clear, step-by-step financial-aid navigation resources, including FAFSA help, cost explanations, and personalized advising to help students understand their financial options.

Fig. 5

Student Debt

37.5% of respondents hold federal student loan debt; of those with debt 40.2% need support navigating these loans.



Suggested Resource

MiLEAP. (2025). Perspectives on Today's Transfer Climate in Michigan



uAspire. (2021). Decoding the Cost of College





Call to Action

Michigan Reconnect works—and it can work even better. The applicant survey confirms what we already know: adult learners are motivated, experienced, and ready to succeed. But they face real, practical barriers—financial strain, caregiving demands, and competing work responsibilities—that threaten completion if left unaddressed.

Michigan lawmakers and institutional leaders should not simply acknowledge these findings; they should partner with the Michigan Center for Adult College Success and the state's Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) network to implement targeted, evidence-based solutions.

The Center stands ready to translate these recommendations into action—coordinating cross-sector support, strengthening navigation systems, and aligning institutional practices with the realities of adult life.

Now is the moment to move from insight to implementation. By investing in proven supports and leveraging the expertise already housed within the Center and AAA partners, Michigan can ensure adult learners don't just enroll through Michigan Reconnect—they persist, complete their credentials, and power the state's workforce and economy for decades to come.



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MCACS.TalentFirst.net | (616) 871-2450
833 Kenmoor Ave SE Ste B | Grand Rapids, MI 49546