

Adults Need More Support for Advanced Education, Study Shows

By Theresa Minton-Eversole, *June 2008*

Barriers to higher education remain formidable for many U.S. working adults, but changes to public and private education policies can refocus and reinvigorate initiatives designed to build a more competitive workforce, according to a report published by the [Council for Adult & Experiential Learning](#) (CAEL).

CAEL's report [Adult Learning in Focus: National and State-by-State Data](#) examines state-by-state performance with regard to enhancing educational access and success for adult learners 25-years old and older. While there has been a dramatic increase in the number of adults obtaining formal learning from various providers, the report notes that the participation rate of adults in public and private degree-granting institutions has remained basically unchanged for more than a decade.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has identified the following characteristics of nontraditional, or adult, students. Many of these students:

- Have delayed enrollment into postsecondary education.
- Attend part time.
- Are financially independent of parents.
- Work full time while enrolled.
- Have dependents other than a spouse.
- Are single parents.
- Lack a standard high school diploma.

Millions of adult learners who might possess one or more of these characteristics and who are in need of instruction are not participating. Individuals who need to enhance their basic literacy skills account for the most obvious participation gap. In fact, statistics show that there are 45 million people in the United States without any postsecondary education. Another 42 million have completed some college coursework but have no degree.

Yet research shows that increasing one's education level is not only essential to obtaining employment, it also affects individuals' overall economic prosperity and career advancement. What's more, increasing the number of degree-holders in a state can have a measurable effect on improving a state's overall economy.

"Focusing only on K-12 programs and tradition-aged [18-to-24-year-old] college students will not be sufficient in meeting workforce needs of the 21st century," said CAEL President and CEO Pamela Tate. "Better paying employment will require postsecondary education not only for the 32 million left out of the economy now, but even for those who already have some training but are in a declining industry and need to return to school to prepare for new careers."

Problems Not Without Solutions

The reasons cited in the report for the lack of adult participation in postsecondary education and training fall into five broad categories:

- Overall strategy for adult participation.
- Data systems and evaluation.
- Interagency cooperation.
- Fiscal and financial policies.
- Academic policies.

For example, the country's post-secondary education policy focuses primarily on serving the needs of the 18-to-24-year-old full-time college students as opposed to older working adults. In terms of financial aid, many states provide little to no monetary assistance to adults whose responsibilities require them to attend college on a part-time basis.

Likewise, employer tuition assistance policies often provide only for reimbursement of course tuition after the coursework is completed.

However, there are things that can be done by employers, state agencies and policymakers and academic institutions that can encourage and facilitate greater adult participation and completion in postsecondary education. For example, states should:

- Identify state needs based on the capacities of the workforce, the needs of existing employers and the needs of employers the state would like to attract.
- Analyze the programs and institutional resources that can serve adult learners and determine whether state policies and practices promote greater participation and success.
- Set explicit statewide goals and develop statewide strategies for reaching those goals, as well as for monitoring progress.
- Determine which goals require direct state action and state subsidy; then allocate resources to achieve the goals.

Among the key recommendations for companies to help tie learning to career planning:

- Engage employees through a process of education and career planning to determine their level of educational development upon entry, their educational and career goals, and a plan for reaching these goals as efficiently as possible.
- Use education and career planning as a method of establishing long-term relationships with employees and encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their learning.
- Engage employees as active partners in the planning, delivery and evaluation of their learning.
- Help employees use assessment as the foundation for making educational decisions.
- Create pathways for adult learners to gain credit for learning from a variety of sources so that college-level learning acquired prior to enrollment can be counted toward institutional credentials and degrees.

Recommendations for addressing financial assistance:

- Inform adult learners about convenient payment options available to them.
- Provide deferred payment options when tuition reimbursement programs do not make funds available until course completion.
- Make financial aid/scholarships available to part-time students.
- Assess charges to learners incrementally during the course of a program and establish equitable refund policies.
- Help learners develop strategies for locating external funding to assist with education costs.
- Work to influence the organization's tuition reimbursement policies so adult learners can access funds at the beginning of the academic process.
- Ensure that learners are not caught between the institution and the sponsoring organization regarding tuition payment issues.
- Design accurate, understandable accounting reports so that billing statements are clear and billing cycles are convenient for the organization.
- Communicate to organizations the basis of cost for services to the organization.

Recommendations for effective technology use:

- Use technology to build community among adult learners living in remote geographical areas.
- Use information technology to provide flexible and timely education and administrative services (such as web registration systems and call centers).
- Use technology to empower adult learners to manage their learning process better and to expand the choices available for learning modes (partial/full Internet-based courses; technology-rich, on-campus instruction).
- Employ technology in the learning experience in ways that mirror the technology-rich environment in which many adults work.

Other recommendations for academic institutions:

- Seek relationships with organizations to reach adult learners through organizationally mediated programs.
- Help establish learning goals that include the organization's future job opportunities and skill needs.
- Work with employers/unions to develop mentoring and advising programs.
- Help organizations develop ways to encourage employees/members to pursue their education (train supervisors to communicate to employees the importance and relevance of learning; develop internal promotional programs to alert employees/members of learning opportunities).
- Provide support for adult learners at times/places that are congruent with work schedules (establish education extension centers at/near work locations).
- Encourage employers to make telephones, computers, Internet access and video conferencing available for employees to engage in education related activities during hours when technology is not being used for business-related activities.

- Use learning technologies at work sites and on desktop computers.
- Work with organizations to measure education program impact on their goals.

“If states want to achieve sustained economic growth and prosperity, they must create policies and a policy framework that will improve the knowledge and skills of their adult workforce,” notes the report. “While nontraditional providers of adult learning will continue to meet important needs, states must make an effort to more effectively utilize the resources of the degree-granting colleges and universities—both those that provide general education as well as those that offer training focused on specific workforce needs of adults.”

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