The Adult Learner:
A Critical Ally for State Economic Development

By Wilson Finch

Critical to state education and economic goals, adult learners will represent a majority of college students in the near future, yet they are largely an untapped resource. States and higher education institutions must adequately address their unique needs, concerns and expectations with comprehensive, proactive and targeted strategies that reflect this new reality.

Since the advent of land grant institutions and the G.I. Bill, public higher education policy has focused on increasing access to colleges and universities across the United States. Recently, this emphasis has expanded to include fostering successful degree completion, with the realization that most students who enroll do not graduate in expected timeframes and many never finish at all.[1] Yet, policies for access and completion have remained primarily directed at traditional college students—full-time, first-time students ages 18 to 22). While there are notable examples of states and institutions developing policies and programs to address nontraditional students' needs,[3] including adults over the age of 24, overall these programs are viewed as extensions of existing traditionally focused programs and do not offer comprehensive support for adult learners. This is perplexing since adults over age 24 are the fastest growing population within American higher education. This article demonstrates why states and public institutions of higher education, or IHE, should focus more resources and efforts on the adult learner population, describes the unique supports and resources adult learners need, and suggests strategies to assist their enrollment, persistence and degree attainment within systems of higher education.

The Traditional Student Myth

Programs and policies directed toward traditional college students assume students have little experience in higher education, lack substantial learning experiences beyond formal education and can prioritize coursework over employment or other obligations. However, as of 2011, adult students made up 38 percent of undergraduates and are the fastest growing student population: by 2019, they are predicted to comprise 61 percent of all undergraduates.[4] Conversely, the traditional K–12-to-college pipeline population is actually in decline.[5] This is a fundamental shift in the makeup of the college student, and nontraditional students are becoming the system's *raison d'être*. Yet, in many cases, this transformation has not provoked changes in how higher education is structured, to whom it is marketed, and what state and institutional supports are offered.

The Degree of Need

The failure of the U.S. to produce enough postsecondary graduates to satisfy future jobs is well-documented.[6] Two outcomes of this shortage are relevant to adult learners. First, the lack of potential workers with the necessary postsecondary credentials is hampering economic development within states.[7] Second, those individuals with postsecondary credentials are much more economically secure in times of economic fluctuation.[8] To address this, by 2014 26 states had adopted some degree attainment goal in order to meet their economic needs.[9] However, achieving these goals is highly unlikely if only traditional students are considered.

The Adult Equation

Take two examples: Iowa and Tennessee. In 2015, Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad set a state degree attainment goal of 70 percent of Iowans by 2025.[10] Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam has set a goal of 55 percent degree attainment by 2025.[11] Table A shows how these goals are represented in real numbers.

Comparing the difference between the current degree attainment level and the goal level with the number of students enrolled in the K–12 system, the challenge of achieving the governors' goals is evident: Even if *every single student* in the public K–12 system graduates from high school, enrolls in college and completes a degree program, Tennessee barely would reach its goal and Iowa would fall short. However, such progressions are unlikely, as Iowa and Tennessee have relatively little room for improvement within the traditional college pipeline.

Table A: Current College Degree Attainment

	Iowa		Tennessee	
	%	Count	%	Count
Current Attainment	36%	555,220	29.7%	1,006,913
Goal	70%	1,091,725	55%	1,864,653
Difference between current count and goal		536,505		857,740
Total Public K–12 Enrollment		498,000		1,006,500

Sources:

Current Attainment
U.S. Census Bureau. "Educational Attainment 2008–2012: 5-Year Estimates." *American Community Survey*, 2012. *http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/product view.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_5YR_S1501&prodType=table.*

Goals
Carnevale, Anthony P., Nicole Smith, Artem Gulish, and Andrew R. Hanson. *Iowa: Education and Workforce Trends through 2025.* Iowa Department of Education and Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015. *https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Iowa_Wrkfrce2025.pdf.*

Drive to 55 Tennessee. Accessed March 23, 2016. *http://driveto55.org/.*

Public K–12 Enrollment
"Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Region, State, and Jurisdiction: Selected Years, Fall 1990 through Fall 2023." *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2013. Institute of Education Sciences—National Center for Education Statistics, Fall 2012. *https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_203.20.asp.*

Table B: High School Graduation, College-going Rates and College Graduation Rates

Rates	Iowa	Tennessee	Best performing states
HS Graduation	90.5	87.2	90.5
College-going	66.6	62.1	78.8
College Graduation	51	41	62

Sources:

High school graduation
"Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/ethnicity and Selected Demographics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2013–14." *Common Core of Data* (*CCD*). Institute of Education Sciences—National Center for Education Statistics, 2013–2014. *http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2013-14.asp.*

College-going rates
"College-Going Rates of High School Graduates—Directly from High School." NCHEMS Information Center. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2010. *http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?submeasure=63&year=2010&level=nation&mode=data&state=0.*

College graduation rates
"Graduation Rates." NCHEMS Information Center. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems., 2009. *http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level=nation&mode=data&state=0&submeasure=24.*

Even if these states match their best performing counterparts within the next few years, they would still fall short of their degree attainment goals. Furthermore, the traditional student population is *decreasing* nationwide;[12] the state goals appear to represent a naïve optimism rather than a viable policy solution if only focusing on traditional students. Yet, most state and institutional resources have been devoted to traditional students. For example, most financial aid is unavailable to adults, marketing is targeted to traditional students and great emphasis is placed on ensuring high school students have a clear pathway into higher education.

This is where the focus of such policies needs to be expanded to include adult learners. Continuing with our previous examples of Iowa and Tennessee, 54.2 percent of Iowa adults and 54.4 percent of Tennessee adults have a high school degree but not a college degree; slightly less than half of these have some college experience.[13] These individuals are likely to have college credits from previous enrollments or could earn some credit for learning gained outside of college, which could significantly reduce time-to-degree for adult degree completion. If 48.6 percent and 36.4 percent of these adult learners could be enticed to return to college and complete their degrees, Iowa and Tennessee would reach their state attainment goals even if public high schools stopped producing students.[14]

From our two examples, we can see that there are limits to improving the high school graduate-to-degree-completion pipeline, but even capturing a relatively minor percentage of adults with high school diplomas could propel a state quickly toward its attainment goals. However, state and institutional efforts often do not reflect this opportunity.

Why are states and IHE, who bemoan low-enrollment statistics or results from performance measures, ignoring this potential solution and a largely untapped pool of enrollment candidates? There are several answers to this question. Perception is a problem, particularly for the general public. When many people think of a college student, they imagine a young, full-time student, living on a university campus. However, these students only represented 15 percent of enrolled students in 2011.[15] This misperception has misdirected efforts and resources, obscured the issue and discouraged nontraditional students. Still these data can surprise even some higher education administrators.

The issue is not that these data do not exist, but rather they are buried in data systems unanalyzed and unpublished unless specifically requested. There

are also political reasons: there is a certain appeal to helping young people pursue their goals that is difficult to transfer to an adult trying to return to college. It is further possible that most lawmakers were themselves traditional students, and may therefore be unaware of the issue. State and institutional inertia also contributes to the problem. While adding a few *ad hoc* supports for adults—such as childcare or online programs—may seem feasible and tangible, completely changing an institution's culture or structure to reflect a new student population reality is a much more difficult task.

In addition to these more systemic problems, attracting nontraditional students is a persistent problem requiring innovative efforts. Traditional students are a captive audience within high schools, however, adults are a more dispersed population and may be more difficult to reach. Targeting this population depends more heavily on mass marketing and creative efforts, such as outreach through employers, unemployment centers and community events.

What are the unique needs of adult learners?

The 2013 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report noted that achieving adult learners' expectations and satisfaction, or "fit," was key to promoting "persistence, student success, and stability," while failing to do so would lead to "higher attrition, poor performance, and fluctuation."[16]

Nontraditional students are more likely to work full time and have children, leading to multiple demands on their time. For many, education is still a priority, albeit a lower one, because they see degree attainment as directly tied to advancement in their careers or income. Accordingly, they seek programs that respect their time and money. IHE can respond to these needs with adult-specific policies and programs, such as those highlighted below. Furthermore, adult students have different learning styles, expectations and requirements (andragogy) compared to traditional students.[17]

Lastly, it is important to recognize that many adults have had previous experiences in higher education or felt it was beyond their reach. In both cases, as many studies have put it, "life got in the way" and non-academic circumstances disrupted degree attainment.[18]

Specific Adult-Focused Strategies

To meet the needs of adult learners, states and IHE should consider whether their efforts to serve this population are proportional to their representativeness in the student population. For example, if adult students make up 40 percent of a system's student population, is 40 percent of the marketing budget used to target them? Does 40 percent of the state's financial aid go to them? Do institutions offer unique and directed supports such as prior learning assessment, accelerated courses and extended hours that recognize their substantial student enrollment numbers? Unfortunately, most institutions and states feel it is sufficient to offer only a limited number of these programs and supports, often confined to specific degree programs and rarely promoted. While helpful, their impact is limited and lacks a comprehensive effect because these efforts merely attempt to shoe-horn a non-traditional student into a traditional model. These programs and resources should be provided at all institutions with significant adult populations or adult enrollment goals, and importantly, they should be offered in all degree programs.

For decades, several exemplary institutions, and more recently, some states have begun to recognize this need. Specific programs and initiatives that are growing in popularity include:

- Adult-specific orientations, student support services, staff
- Andragogical teaching approaches—addressing the different ways adult students learn within the classroom
- Competency-based education, or CBE—a time-flexible instructional model that commonly combines assessments of prior and classroom learning with more modularized teaching
- Flexible scheduling, accelerated courses, online courses—all opportunities to adapt class times around competing obligations of adult learners
- Interdisciplinary adult degree programs—programs that speed up degree completion by finding the most favorable combination of previous credits, transfer credits and prior learning assessment, or PLA, credits when a more specific major is not necessary or desired
- Life and career planning—increasing efforts to tie major and course selections to the student's professional and life goals
- Marketing—directed specifically at adults and addressing their concerns, needs and goals
- Partnerships with local businesses—encouraging business partners to support employees' desires to return to school and make more concrete links between degree attainment and career opportunities

- Prior learning assessment—granting of college credit for learning obtained outside of the classroom[19]
- Substantial financial aid for adults—a high priority for many adults that is not met by state and federal offerings and that does not incentivize PLA and CBE
- Targeted incentives for institutions—links to performance funding, state-organized innovation programs, streamlined procedures, lowered policy barriers, shared resources and intra-state networks

Also critical to these strategies is how well they are integrated into the IHE and state systems. These efforts and initiatives should not depend upon a series of "ifs": *if* a student asks and asks the right person, *if* the student choses the right degree program, *if* the student is at the right institution with the right support structures, etc. If IHE and states are serious about boosting adult enrollment and completion, they must be more *proactive* and *comprehensive* in their efforts.

Nevertheless, it is critical to note that these supports, when done properly, do not undermine the academic integrity and rigor of degrees, but rather remove barriers, attract new students, and make components of higher education more efficient and effective, less burdensome and confusing, and more relevant to and respectful of the lives of their students. Our economy and the personal wellbeing of our students depend heavily upon *quality* and *rigorous* postsecondary credentials.

Conclusion

The economic future of the states will be heavily dependent upon how well equipped and educated its future workforce will be, and this future is too important to leave to chance. A valuable and plentiful resource, the adult learner remains a highly underutilized and untapped resource for public higher education, which could boost the economic development of states while also providing increased financial stability and career advancement to these students. There are longstanding practices and new innovations that should be studied, exemplified, scaled and supported in order to develop this resource. The adult learner, rather than being an anomaly within higher education, could become its most important ally.

Notes

[1] The national fall 2006 cohort for associates and bachelors students were compared with the combined summer 2009 graduates using the most recent NCHEMS data.

"Graduation Rates." NCHEMS Information Center. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems., 2009. *http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level= nation&mode=data&state=0&submeasure=24.*

Further reading: American Association of Community Colleges. "National College Completion Initiatives."

"Four-Year Myth." Complete College America, 2014. *http://completecollege.org/new-report-4-year-degrees/.*

Russell, Alene. "A Guide to Major U.S. College Completion Initiatives." *AASCU Policy Matters*. American Association of State Colleges and Universities, October 2011.

[2] For examples of specific state PLA efforts, see "State Policy Approaches to Support Prior Learning Assessment: 2015 Update." *Resource Guides for State Leaders*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and HCM Strategists, 2016. *http://www.cael.org/pdfs/ cael_hcm-pla-state-policy-report-2016.*

For broader, adult-oriented programs, see "Re-Enroll Adults with Some College and No Degree." *Strategy Labs: State Policy Agenda*, April 2015. Lumina Strategy Labs. *http://strategylabs.luminafoundation.org/higher-education-state-policy-agenda/action-20.*

[3] I will be primarily focusing on "adult learners," which are defined as students aged 25 to 64. However, I will also reference "nontraditional students," which the National Center for Education Statistics defines as having one or more of the following characteristics: "delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part time; works full time; is financially independent; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma." Adult learners represent a substantial proportion of nontraditional students, and there is considerable overlap in terms of needs, expectations, and outlooks.

Pelletier, Stephen G. "Success for Adult Students." *Public Purpose*, 2010, 2–6.

[4] Hess, Frederick. "Old School: College's Most Important Trend Is the Rise of the Adult Student." *The Atlantic*. *http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/09/old-school-colleges-most-important-trend-is-the-rise-of-the-adult-student/245823/.*

Wyatt, Linda G. "Nontraditional Student Engagement: Increasing Adult Student Success and Retention." *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* 59, no. 1 (2011): 10–20.

[5] Kiley, Kevin. "The Pupil Cliff." *Inside Higher Ed*, January 11, 2013. *https://www.insidehighered.com/ news/2013/01/11/ wiche-report-highlights-decline-high-school-graduates-and-growing-diversity.*

[6] Baum, Sandy, Jennifer Ma, and Kathleen Payea. "Education Pays 2013." The College Board, 2013. *http:// www.rilin.state.ri.us/Special/ses15/commdocs/Education %20Pays,%20The%20College%20Board.pdf.*

Carnevale, Anthony P., Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl. *Help Wanted: Projections of Job and Education Require-*

ments through 2018. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010.

Carnevale, Anthony P., Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl. *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013. *https://repository.library. georgetown.edu/handle/10822/559311*.

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment." Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 15, 2016. *http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm*.

[9] HCM Strategists. "States with Higher Education Attainment Goals." Lumina Foundation, December 11, 2014. *http://strategylabs.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/50StateAttainmentGoals121114. pdf*.

[10] Carnevale, Anthony P., Nicole Smith, Artem Gulish, and Andrew R. Hanson. *Iowa: Education and Workforce Trends through 2025.* Iowa Department of Education and Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015. *https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/ Iowa_Wrkfrce2025.pdf*.

[11] *Drive to 55 Tennessee.* Accessed March 23, 2016. *http://driveto55.org/*.

[12] Kiley, "The Pupil Cliff."

[13] U.S. Census Bureau. "Educational Attainment 2008–2012: 5-Year Estimates." *American Community Survey*, 2012. *http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_5YR _S1501&prodType=table*.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Hess, "Old School."

[16] Noel-Levitz and Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). "National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report," 2013. *http://www.cael.org/pdfs/ ali_report_0713*.

[17] Knowles, Malcolm S. *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge, 1980.

Ross-Gordon, Jovita M. "Research on Adult Learners: Supporting the Needs of a Student Population That Is No Longer Nontraditional." *Peer Review* 13, no. 1, Winter 2011. Association of American Colleges and Universities. *https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/ research-adult-learners-supporting-needs-student-population-no*.

[18] Steele, Patricia, and Wendy Erisman. "Adult College Completion in the 21st Century: What We Know and What We Don't." *Higher Ed Insight*, 2015. Adult College Completion Network. *http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm? abstract_id=2622629*.

[19] Additional information about PLA and student outcomes: Klein-Collins, Rebecca. "Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes." Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010. *http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED524753*.

About the Author

Wilson Finch has been a senior consultant at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) since 2014. His primary focus has been on statewide and systemwide approaches to prior learning assessment (PLA) and higher education support for workforce projects. Previously, Wilson was the assistant director for Postsecondary Completion Initiatives for the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC).