



STRENGTHENING AMERICA'S ECONOMY

**BY EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL
OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKING ADULTS**

Policy Opportunities to Connect
the Working Adult to Today's Economy
through Education and Credentials



**National Adult
Learner Coalition**



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THE NATIONAL ADULT LEARNER COALITION

was created to address the need for a unified voice representing the adult learner and the institutions and programs that serve them. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), Presidents' Forum, and University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA), with support from Lumina Foundation, created the National Adult Learner Coalition. The Coalition will promote policies that align postsecondary education and America's workforce development goals to produce better outcomes and access for adult learners, who are the majority of today's students.

Introduction

America's middle class has lost a lot of its strength in recent decades due to a rapidly changing economy. The well-paying jobs of yesterday—those that could easily be accessed by someone with just a high school diploma—have been disappearing. Today's economy does offer opportunity for good jobs with solid pay, but those opportunities are requiring a higher level of skill and credential than ever before.

Focusing on education at the K-12 level is not enough to provide the needed skills and credentials. Even if America had a higher high school graduation rate than it does currently, and all of those high school graduates went on to postsecondary study, the United States still would not meet the credentialing needs of its current labor market. Building the skills and education of adults, and not just young people, is critical for filling that gap.

More and more, America's employers need workers with higher level skills, whether obtained through pursuit of the bachelor's degree, or through shorter term training represented by very different credentials like certifications, certificates, and newer forms of postsecondary credentials such as badges and micro-credentials. As the United States continues to compete in the global knowledge economy, moving the needle on education and training for the adult worker and student becomes more and more important. Creating better education and training opportunities for adult workers who have been left behind in the present economy will be critical to America's progress.¹

Who is Today's Learner?

The current federal policy architecture for postsecondary education was designed for “traditional” students who entered college full-time directly from high school. More than 2.6 million students were attending a four-year college and living on campus in 2011.² These students entered college full-time directly from high school. In that same year, however, 14.9 million working parents, veterans and military personnel, caregivers, and others—85 percent of the 17.6 million Americans enrolled in higher education in the fall of 2011—were also attending college.² These contemporary (sometimes called “non-traditional”) students struggle to balance the competing demands of work, family, and education.

These demographics present a game-changing moment in American higher education; a pivotal time at which policy and practice must come to terms with the reality that most students attending institutions of higher education in the United States are not, in fact, 18–22 year olds fresh out of high school—but rather, adult learners who are juggling multiple life demands while trying to complete a credential that will better not only their lives, but the lives of their families, as well.

¹ Blivin & Wallerstein, 2016

² U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011



Challenges to the Success of Adult Learners in Postsecondary Education

Because the policy architecture for higher education was fashioned for first-time, full-time students, adult learners face special challenges in trying to achieve a postsecondary credential.

CHALLENGE: Information on necessary local labor market skills and related credentials can be missing, confusing, or overwhelming

One barrier to the success of adult learners is the difficulty of understanding what to study and what kind of credential is needed. Many adults know that they need postsecondary credentials to advance their careers or change course in this economy; but they often do not know what opportunities are out there for them, what kinds of credentials they need for those opportunities, and what colleges are the best fit for their goals and circumstances as a working adult. Although there are many sources of print and web-based information about jobs, skills, college rankings, and quality metrics, the average person needs the right information and guidance to make sense of it all. For many adults, the choice or decision comes down to either that last piece of advertising or information to hit their email inbox; or word of mouth from one or two individuals who have had experiences that were a fit for themselves, but may not be a fit for the person now seeking answers. This has partially led to what has recently been called “swirl” in the postsecondary world; with students transferring from one program to another because they discover they made the incorrect choice of college or program originally.

CHALLENGE: Adult learners need to complete credentials more flexibly and more quickly

For most adult learners, juggling learning with a full-time work schedule (and perhaps the needs of a family) proves an even greater challenge than finding the needed pathway for career success. These adult learners, therefore, need to find ways to complete their credentials with greater flexibility and more quickly than traditional college students. Yet, most colleges do not design their programs to be a good fit for the working adult. Postsecondary programs need to take into account that adult learners not only require schedule flexibility, but that these learners need more efficient ways to complete their studies and credentials. Many have often already started college at some point, for example, or they may have achieved an equivalent of college learning that is credit-worthy—and yet, obtaining credit for prior learning can prove a huge challenge for many students. Postsecondary institutions are not consistent in regard to either schedule flexibility or efficient acceptance of credit for prior learning.

CHALLENGE: Many lack broadband access

Many adult learners lack access to the technologies often required to complete college-level coursework. In fact, 10% of Americans (34 million individuals) lack access to high-speed broadband service; and of these, 39% of rural Americans (23 million individuals) lack this kind of access.³ More and more adult-centric programs are transitioning to online programs; or at the very least, blended learning programs with both face-to-face and online components. In fact, even most completely campus-based programs in the 21st century include virtual components or the need to access digital textbooks and other digital library resources. And yet, many adult learners do not have access to the broadband or hardware capabilities to be able to actively engage in these learning modalities due to cost or limited rural availability. The cost and accessibility available to Americans lags behind those of countries like Japan and South Korea. In measures of cost, Americans pay more than citizens of other countries, sometimes with decreased internet speeds.⁴

CHALLENGE: A patchwork of state education regulations for online learning isn't well suited to the many adults who pursue postsecondary learning

Today's student is mobile, may attend more than one institution before completing a degree, and may very well be seeking an online or distance education solution to align with their personal, family, and career goals. Sometimes, however, state regulations regarding which online program may be offered in which state can become a barrier for students seeking the credential that is the best fit for their needs. These regulations can form a significant challenge for adult learners attempting to select the right program, at the right time, for their educational and career success.

³ FCC, 2016

⁴ Russo, Kehl, Morgus, & Morris, 2014





Current Building Blocks for Adult Learners in the Postsecondary Space

Despite these challenges, there are portions of our postsecondary system that are providing great opportunities for working adults to pursue education and skills. These are important building blocks for establishing a more robust and responsive system that can help build America's middle class.

BUILDING BLOCK: Spectrum of higher education institutions across America

An important feature of American higher education is the broad spectrum of types of institutions that exist to serve students from all walks of life. American colleges and universities offer a wide range of programs to suit the needs of different learners with differing goals. There are community and technical colleges, four-year institutions and graduate institutions with different missions (e.g., teaching, research) and affiliations (e.g., state or city focused, religiously based). This range of higher education institutions represents the fabric of America in the range of missions and goals for their students and the respective roles they play in how America is educated. And among these different institutions, there are some colleges and universities that are serving adult learners very well.

BUILDING BLOCK: Online education

The field of online education has grown significantly over the past few decades. Many who had earlier believed that online education was really just the business of proprietary or for-profit higher education institutions are now realizing that the growth of online programs in the public and private non-profit sector has been booming—especially in the continuing education divisions of higher education institutions. Online programs have become a key offering at a wide range of institutions, including community colleges, as well as four-year public and private postsecondary institutions.

Online education has massively expanded access for adult learners, transcending not only distance but time, since many of these adults require the flexibility of schedule that online programs offer. Even with high quality standards, most online higher education programs offer students the ability to log into their courses at the times of day that are most suited to their schedules, so that they may complete their learning in a way that fits with their other life requirements.

BUILDING BLOCK: Financial aid for lower income students

The United States has a long history of providing non-merit-based financial aid to lower income students, in order to facilitate their ability to complete college degrees at all levels. This is one of the most important hallmarks of American postsecondary education—in order to provide opportunity for all, and to allow people from all backgrounds to enjoy the possibility of achieving the education to reach their goals. An important cornerstone of financial aid has been the Pell Grant, and it continues to be a critical building block to maintaining educational opportunity for a large percentage of the American population. The federal Pell Grant was created by the Higher Education Act of 1965; and it is limited to students with financial need who have not earned their first bachelor's degree, or who are enrolled in certain post-baccalaureate programs through participating institutions. Pell grants do not need to be repaid—as they are not loans; they represent a national investment in the education of Americans who can establish a financial need for this subsidy.

BUILDING BLOCK: Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

Many adults have done significant learning outside the college classroom. That learning may have been acquired through military service, work in industry, or other activities like volunteer work or self-study. Some colleges offer what is called Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, which is a service that evaluates a student's learning for the purpose of awarding college credit when appropriate. The methods for assessing this learning include standardized exams (like CLEP tests), individual portfolio assessment, faculty-designed exams, and formal review of non-college training.

PLA is one of the most important building blocks toward degree attainment for adult learners. If a student is awarded credit for college-level learning that has occurred outside the college classroom and that counts toward their degree, this means that fewer overall credits must be completed for graduation. This saves both time and tuition dollars for the student, and can save scholarship and loan dollars for both federal government and other scholarship or loan sources. In addition to saving time and money, PLA may also motivate the student to persist and



complete their studies. One CAEL study of more than 60,000 adult students found that those awarded PLA credit were two-and-a-half times more likely to complete their degrees.⁵

BUILDING BLOCK: Competency-Based Education (CBE)

Competency-based education, or CBE, is an approach to postsecondary education that focuses on what students know and can do, rather than on how much time it takes to learn or how it was learned. CBE provides an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design, and learners only earn credentials when they can demonstrate mastery through multiple forms of assessment.

CBE has started to gain momentum across postsecondary institutions as a method of educating students, and most specifically adult students, in part because these programs directly address the employer complaint that today's graduates are not ready for the workplace. In CBE programs, the competencies that are required for degrees often align directly with skills that employers say are needed in the workplace—and the colleges make sure, through assessments, that their graduates have those skills. Many of the new CBE models leverage technology to offer programs online and at a personalized pace, making them ideal for the adult learner. Further, students with considerable prior knowledge and existing skills from their work and life experiences do not need to sit in classes that cover content and skills they have already mastered. They can build on their existing knowledge and focus on material in which they have not yet become proficient.

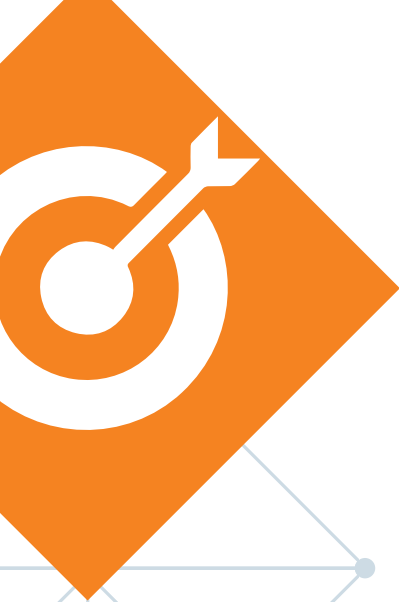
BUILDING BLOCK: Alternative pathways and credentials

Alternative pathways represent quicker paths to achieving a bachelor's degree than the traditional route of completing 120 or more credits at a single higher education institution. These pathways can be very beneficial to adult students trying to complete a degree more quickly and with less expense. Alternative credentials are another important building block for adult learners. There is a broad range of experimentation occurring in both the areas of alternative pathways and credentials, mostly benefiting adult learners.

Alternative credentials now include specialty certificates offered by colleges and universities; badges, which generally signify completion of a specific training or competency; and micro-credentials, which are usually a condensed or shortened version of an existing degree that can be completed more quickly and with less expense than the traditional degree. Boot camps, which award students credentials for completing intensive courses in specific high employability areas like computer programming, have burst onto the postsecondary scene and have gained some recent popularity with both adult learners and employers.

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⁵ Klein-Collins, 2010



Policy Opportunities

There are some immediate policy opportunities that could help build the middle class—and connect more of the workforce to today’s economy—through education. These policy opportunities would support and continue to expand access to the kinds of building blocks that already exist for the adult learner.

POLICY OPPORTUNITY: Recognizing student mobility

Reduce state-by-state regulations regarding online education programs.

There is great interest in the current administration and Congress in removing unnecessary federal regulations. Many postsecondary institutions would welcome some relief from their current regulatory burdens. However, in the efforts to cut regulations, it is imperative that new challenges for the adult learner are not inadvertently created by shifting responsibility to the state level. If policies and regulations for online and distance programs are completely devolved to the individual state level, this will increase costs for both the institutions offering the programs and for the learners in these programs. Moreover, requiring each online program to be approved in every state where students are registered is so onerous that many institutions will choose not to serve students in those states. This would dramatically restrict opportunities for online learners. It is therefore necessary to protect the adult learner who is choosing an online modality for his or her program of study, and that there be state reciprocity for online programs of study.

POLICY OPPORTUNITY: Expansion of Pell Grants

Maintain the current Pell Grant program and expand its status to a year-round program.

The current Pell Grant program is a critical building block for creating ladders to the middle class through education. It must be maintained and expanded in order to make opportunities to reach the middle class a reality for more adults. Several key changes would make this program better for the working adult. First, the program should be available to students who take classes during the summer, as many adults are not interested in a “summer break” and need to continue their studies every term. Second, the program is not currently designed to be beneficial to students who may only be able to take one or two courses at a time—essentially, the exact situation facing many working adults. Finally, the income thresholds are set too low for many working adults who nevertheless need financial assistance in order to pursue these important educational and skill-building opportunities. An expanded Pell Grant that supports more working adults could help with meeting this economy’s educational attainment and workforce development needs.

There have been policymakers who have suggested that year-round financial aid can help students complete college more quickly by increasing course enrollment and credit accumulation outside of the fall and spring. There is evidence to support both halves of that argument: that year-round financial aid can increase enrollment during the summer and winter, and that summer and winter enrollment can help students earn more credits.⁶

POLICY OPPORTUNITY: Removal of financial aid barriers to CBE and PLA

Change federal financial aid rules so that more adults have access to customized degree pathways through CBE and PLA.

Currently, federal financial aid cannot always be used for degree programs that offer more customized, flexible approaches like CBE and PLA. The requirement is that the degree program demonstrate equivalences to credit hours, even when learning is defined and assessed in other ways. For the most part, federal financial aid regulations are currently designed to support student learning when it takes place in a college classroom that is led by an instructor and is based on the credit hour. Federal financial aid (also known as Title IV funds) needs to be redesigned so that it can cover the costs associated with assessing prior learning for credit as well as direct assessment of competencies that don’t fit neatly in a credit-hour-based framework.

One problematic regulation in financial aid is the primary focus on the instructor rather than on the value of student learning in and of itself. CBE programs are currently required to have “regular and substantive” interaction between faculty and students in order to be recognized for Title IV funding. Many CBE programs, however, have had success with unbundling the role of faculty; so that it is not the same faculty member who coaches the student in the classroom who then assesses their work for achieved competency, for example. We recommend that the “regular and substantive” regulation be cut, as it hamstrings quality CBE programs

⁶ MDRC, 2015

from customizing their offerings in ways that most benefit students and their learning.⁷ Eliminating this regulation is also needed in order to allow Prior Learning Assessments as an allowable educational expense.

This is just one of many challenges to fit CBE and PLA into the regulatory structure of federal financial aid. Other regulatory barriers to the development of more CBE programs and the expansion of PLA opportunities ought to be removed.

Working learners need flexible financial assistance that is guaranteed over a number of years, so they can balance work and learning by finding an educational program that allows them to meet their employment and family responsibilities. It is time for a clear policy solution to help them pay for their education.

POLICY OPPORTUNITY: Expansion and Promotion of Section 127 of the Tax Code
Expand and more widely publicize Section 127 benefits to industry and employers.

The tax code currently offers an important support for educating working adults. Section 127 of the tax code makes employer education benefits tax exempt so that they aren't counted as employee income for tax purposes. These regulations benefit workers, employers, and the economy by allowing employers to receive tax benefits for providing employee tuition assistance. As the overarching barrier to education for adults is cost, employer-paid tuition can alleviate some of the cost burden for working adults, particularly since many do not qualify for federal Pell Grants.

Through Section 127, employees are assisted with their tuition costs, employers gain a more highly educated and skilled workforce, and the economy benefits overall from the higher level of education of skilled and professional workers in the labor force. This is one of those win-win-win opportunities for policymakers, employers, and working learners.

As the administration and Congress consider ways to simplify the tax code, it is crucial that Section 127 tax benefits remain. Equally importantly, the maximum annual benefit has been frozen at \$5,250 for thirty years, and has therefore not kept up with rising college tuition costs. Expanding the dollar amount of the benefit would provide employees with greater opportunities for pursuing education without paying taxes on their tuition. As Section 127 regulations are expanded, they should also be promoted strongly to the business community, so that many more working adults can have critical financial support to pursue education and training.

POLICY OPPORTUNITY: Infrastructure expansion

Utilize infrastructure training programs to enhance American workers' skillsets and improve high-speed broadband access.

Recently discussions about improving infrastructure have become popular among lawmakers. As legislators consider infrastructure improvements and analyze how to budget for those that will best improve "what needs fixing," the adult learner needs to be kept in mind. Education and training programs that will assist the working adult and advance his or her opportunities in the 21st century economy will also assist the United States economy. Department of Labor grants focused on training opportunities can be leveraged for initiatives that support adult learners enrolled in both distance learning and on-the-ground instructional sites.

An infrastructure package is a natural opportunity to open up new work opportunities for people; and because so many infrastructure projects will require skilled workers, a comprehensive infrastructure initiative will need to include resources to build the skills of the workforce. Policymakers need to ensure that these training opportunities are accessible to adults who have been disconnected from labor market opportunities—and consider how to prepare them, not just for the short-term infrastructure job, but also to position them for a long-term career in growth industries.

In addition, infrastructure investments should include improving high-speed broadband access throughout the country. This would not only be important for supporting business and industry growth, but also would expand access to online learning opportunities for adults.

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⁷ Brower & Schejbal, 2016



Conclusion

A historic time has been reached in the 21st century—one that has both the United States and the world wondering: will American educational attainment be the beacon for the world to follow?

This critical moment presents a policy opportunity to help the disconnected worker who has been disengaged from the domestic, and the global, economy. It is an opportunity to design a road map to help renew the middle class and connect people to economic opportunity through education. There is a need to help the disconnected American regain a grip on the economic ladder of opportunity through education. The ladder will need dedication from many and a united sense of purpose. Yet these goals can be achieved if the present opportunity is seized.

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National Adult Learner Coalition

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