



**POLICY  
MATTERS**

## Addressing the Needs of Adult Learners

*In today's workplace, lifelong learning has become a fact of life. As the American economy evolves to become more knowledge-based, a growing number of its citizens are turning to college in order to expand their skills, earning potential and career paths. A third of these students are 25 years of age or older, a group that possesses a distinct set of goals, views and needs.*

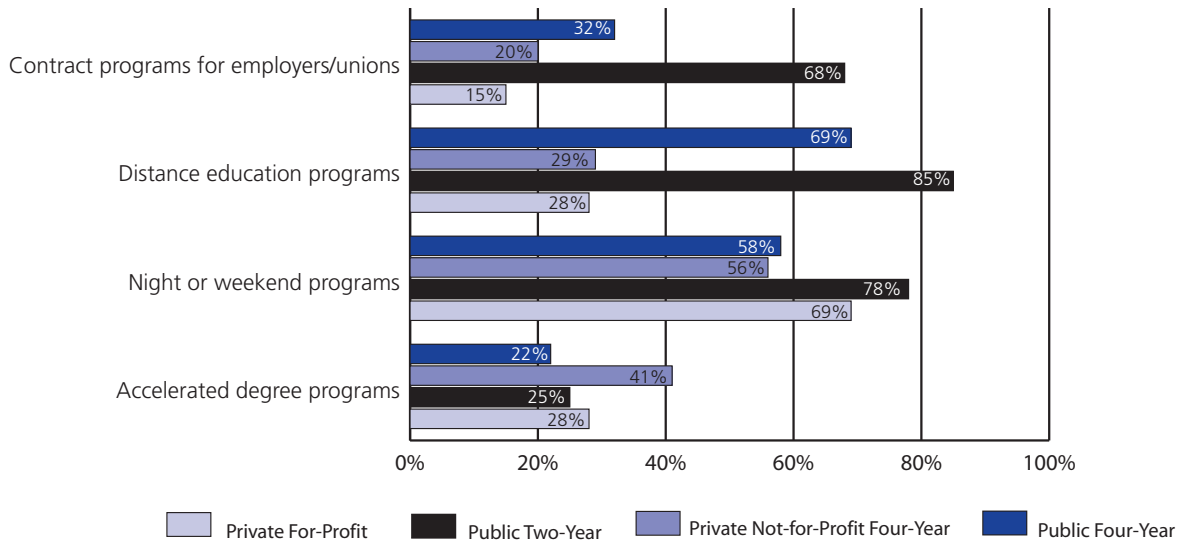
### **Context**

Today's workforce is distinctly different from a generation earlier. Rapidly changing technology, greater job instability and higher industry expectations that workers be more flexible require adults to continue learning throughout their careers. Almost one in 10 adults (9 percent) were enrolled in a college degree program for work-related reasons in 2002-03, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Forty percent of all adults participate in some type of work-related formal education and about half is provided by business or industry. Colleges, universities and vocational/technical schools educate just one-fifth of them, leaving a great opportunity—and responsibility—for public postsecondary institutions to provide continuing learning to more adult students.

These working students have contributed to the evolution of the country's campuses. Today almost three-quarters of undergraduates are in some way nontraditional, with more than one-third of all students being 25 years or older. Adult students enroll in college for many different reasons and at different points in their careers, but they often face similar logistical, academic and financial obstacles when trying to achieve access and success in higher education. In short, they face barriers because institutions and policies continue to focus on traditional students.

Although community colleges have historically served adult students, public four-year institutions remain the gateway for adults to earn a low-cost four-year degree. State policymakers and higher education institutions must do more to encourage

## Percentage of Institutions Offering Special Academic Programs by Sector (2004)



**Source:** American Council on Education, *Improving Lives Through Higher Education: Campus Programs and Policies for Low-Income Adults*, 2005.

greater participation and success among older students.

## Observations

**Adults seeking postsecondary education face many logistical challenges. Supportive institutional and state policies and practices can encourage their participation and success.**

Compared to traditional students, many more adult students have full-time jobs, spouses, and/or dependent children—in short, they are place-bound and busy people. For the approximately 40 percent of adult undergraduates whose incomes are less than \$25,000, the challenges are even greater. For example, a recent American Council on Education (ACE) study found that a majority (54 percent) of low-income adult students with children are single. Not surprisingly, adult students are far more likely than traditional students to attend college part-time.

For-profit institutions, distance education providers, and accelerated degree programs at traditional—largely private—institutions aimed at

the adult market have grown in recent decades. This expansion, while significant, still does not reach the majority of adults in need of further education.

Public colleges and universities have taken steps to serve adult learners as well, but state leadership and support are needed to make adult learners a higher priority on many campuses. (See graph.) Institutions need to engage in outreach activities that encourage participation. They need to expand flexibility in course delivery by offering weekend and evening classes, accelerated degree programs and distance learning. Institutions can develop satellite campuses at convenient locations, contract programs for local employers or unions, child care, adult student centers and other support services for adults.

The University of Akron's (Ohio) Adult Focus program, for example, was recognized by the American College Personnel Association as an outstanding adult learner program. It offers comprehensive services for prospective and enrolled adult students, including specialized

advising and financial aid information, evening orientation and office hours, “transitions” and study skills workshops, a mentoring program, child care referral, accelerated programs, an adult learners student organization, and places to spend time and network with other adults. Many of these services have been shown to correlate with student success, particularly for low-income students.

**Adult students also face an array of academic challenges and institutional and state policies can increase their likelihood of success.** First, a sizable proportion of adults, particularly low-income adults, are academically under-prepared for college-level work, putting them at greater risk of failure. ACE found that 41 percent of low-income adult students have taken a remedial course, compared with 32 percent of other adult students and 31 percent of traditional students. These students need access to remedial courses and benefit from institutional early warning systems and other supports that target struggling students.

Some adults come to college with considerable real world and/or academic experience that, if recognized, would promote program completion and reduce costs and time-to-degree. Statewide transfer and articulation policies are a first step. In addition, policies on assessment of prior learning can support the granting of credit for life experiences and for courses taken outside of traditional academic settings (e.g., industry-provided courses).

Finally, adults generally tend to have different educational goals and learning styles than traditional students, with a particular focus on how their courses relate to their lives and jobs. Colleges need to recognize these differences and capitalize on them as strengths that adults bring to the classroom. Small group discussions, for example, allow adult students to connect to each other as well as tie classroom learning to real world experiences. In many cases, faculty professional development aimed at teaching adult learners

would be productive, but ACE estimates that only 13 percent of public four-year institutions offer such professional development.

**Financial aid for adult students is limited, but policymakers are beginning to expand programs while advocacy groups are developing even more innovative plans.** Research suggests that adult learners receiving financial aid are far more likely to persist than their peers. But many student aid programs are geared primarily toward traditional students, making it difficult for older students to qualify for the assistance they need. While a majority of federal financial aid programs (including the Pell Grant) are available to part-time students, most require that students enroll at least half time, including the Stafford and Plus loans. This proves difficult for working students, many of whom only have the time or money to take one class per semester.

Similar issues come into play with federal tax credits. The HOPE Scholarship Credit that provides up to \$1,500 in tax credits for the first two-years of postsecondary education is limited to students who attend at least halftime. The Lifetime Learning Tax Credit allows students studying beyond their first two years of undergraduate work or those enrolled less than half time to claim a tax credit of 20 percent of the first \$5,000 in education expenses, up to \$1,000. While the program is open to those taking few classes, it severely restricts the amount available to part-time students – just 20 percent of expenses, compared to 100 percent under the HOPE program.

While most state financial aid programs are geared toward recent high school graduates attending college full-time, a growing number of states are beginning to realize the importance of helping adults obtain a college degree. At least 10 states have created special policies or programs designed to provide either special funding or broaden existing programs to include students enrolled in fewer classes. As part of a renewed interest

in workforce development, several governors expanded access to their state's financial aid programs in 2005. Pennsylvania's Governor Edward Rendell committed \$10 million to provide financial aid to working part-time students, while Washington Governor Christine Gregoire lowered the eligibility requirements for the State Need Grant from six to four credits.

Beyond the federal and state level, advocates also are developing ways to get employers more involved in educating their workforce. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is conducting a multi-year demonstration of Lifelong Learning Accounts. These accounts are similar to an employer-based 401(K) with employees contributing a tax-exempt portion of their paycheck each pay period to an education savings account. The employer would then match the money, up to a cap. The demonstration is currently being tested among four industries in three cities.

## Conclusion

For too many years, the needs of adult learners have largely flown under the radar screen of policymakers and campus leaders. This has been changing to some degree, but more needs to be done. Federal financial aid policy needs to be more adult-friendly. States need to systematically assess their human capital needs, set goals for adult learning, establish funding policies that support these goals and monitor progress. State, system and campus leaders need to work collaboratively with the business community, labor unions and other agencies and organizations. Four-year institutions need to improve the ways they serve adult learners, replacing outmoded policies and practices with ones supportive of older students.

It is not simply a matter of helping individuals. The nation's economy and future prosperity depend on the skills of its workforce, which requires access to lifelong learning.

## Resources

### American Association of State Colleges and Universities

**(AASCU).** Military families who move frequently from place to place have particular difficulties completing degrees.

AASCU sponsors the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) to provide educational opportunities for servicemembers and their families.

[soc.aascu.org](http://soc.aascu.org)

**American Council on Education (ACE).** ACE maintains a Center for Lifelong Learning and conducts a project on "Improving Lives: Ensuring the Academic Success of Low-Income Adults."

[acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/CPA/OngoingProjects/ImprovingLives/improve\\_lives.htm](http://acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/CPA/OngoingProjects/ImprovingLives/improve_lives.htm)

**Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).** CAEL's primary mission is to maximize the learning options for adult learners. It offers resources for institutions and policymakers, particularly based on its eight "principles of effectiveness" for serving adult learners.

[cael.org/](http://cael.org/)

**FutureWorks.** The report *Held Back: How Student Aid Programs Fail Working Adults*, published in 2002, analyzes how well federal and state postsecondary student aid meets the needs of working adults.

[futureworks-web.com/pdf/Held%20Back%20report.pdf](http://futureworks-web.com/pdf/Held%20Back%20report.pdf)

**Lumina Foundation for Education.** Aiding adult learners is a priority funding area for the Lumina Foundation and its website provides resources on lifelong learning, including its recent Focus magazine issue entitled "Lifelong Lessons."

[luminafoundation.org/adult\\_learners/index.html](http://luminafoundation.org/adult_learners/index.html)

**State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO).** A 2003 report, *Adult Learners and State Policy*, puts forth a "continuum of state policies" in five crucial areas that influence adult participation.

[sheeo.org/workfrce/CAEL%20paper.pdf](http://sheeo.org/workfrce/CAEL%20paper.pdf)

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