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Strategies to Support Adult Learners and Some College, No Degree Students "To and Through" a Postsecondary Credential

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Abstract

With generous support from Grantmakers for Education's Learning, Evaluation & Data Impact Group and the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, I partnered with Ascendium and program officers in their Streamline Key Learner Transitions focus area to examine the current status, scope, and impact of existing retention and completion strategies to support adult learners and some college, no degree students.

This project had four primary goals: (1) to assemble an inventory of existing programs; (2) to develop a typology of these programs across important contextual domains; (3) to compile a brief literature review of existing research on strategies to support adult learners and some college, no degree students; and (4) to identify actionable opportunities for research, philanthropy, and policy or practice. This executive summary focuses on the first two goals and additionally presents and describes a third deliverable: a map of programs included in the inventory and typology.

The Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory is a representative list of 83 individual programs and 15 common strategies that states, regions, and institutions have adopted to serve adult learners and some college, no degree students across a variety of levels, contexts, and strategies. The Typology takes these programs and scatters them across important program domains—location, audience, strategy, and solution—allowing one to quickly view clusters of practices and to begin answering "what works." A map then captures the state, regional, and institutional programs to view their geographic reach and to identify areas of relatively high or low support for adult learners and some college, no degree students.

Keywords

higher education, adult learners, some college no degree, public policy

Disciplines

Adult and Continuing Education | Education | Education Economics | Higher Education | Online and Distance Education | Prison Education and Reentry | Vocational Education

Comments

For access to the inventory, typology, and map that accompany the executive summary, literature review, and opportunities for policy and research, please visit the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness' (SREE) Summer Fellows Research Findings page: https://sree.memberclicks.net/summer-fellows-research

Strategies to Support Adult Learners and Some College, No Degree Students "*To and Through*" a Postsecondary Credential

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inventory, Typology, and Map

The individual and societal benefits of earning a postsecondary credential have never been more salient than they are today. Not only does a degree, on average, lead to higher labor-market earnings, but some educational attainment beyond high school is now central to upward social mobility (Chetty et al., 2020; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Despite this reality, just over 41% of the U.S. population age 25 and older holds an associate degree or higher,[1] and more than 36 million Americans began college but departed before earning a credential (termed *some college, no degree*; Shapiro et al., 2019). These individuals represent a key opportunity for states and communities to increase their rates of educational attainment while simultaneously reducing persistent gaps in degree completion by race, socioeconomic status, and geography (Baker et al., 2018; Deming & Dynarski, 2009; Hillman, 2016).

While adult learners and some college, no degree students face similar access and completion challenges as their "traditional" peers—including, among others, information constraints and declining affordability—they may also face a host of additional and complex barriers: caring for a parent, spouse, or dependent; balancing multiple life roles, including work and school; difficulty accessing community or institutional resources; and more (Hutchens, 2016; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013). These realities have led to worse postsecondary outcomes: The first-year persistence rate for students age 25 and older who began college in 2018 was over 33 percentage points lower than that of students age 20 and younger (80.4% compared to 47.3%; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

Given the individual, familial, and societal benefits of a college degree—and a pressing need for a more educated workforce—state, local, and institutional policies to support adult learners and some college, no degree students *to and through* postsecondary education are of great importance (Carnevale et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2019). This policy imperative may be even more important given the economic realities imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

> **"Going back to school is often difficult for many students at the best of times. Now, as they navigate both a worldwide pandemic and an uncertain labor market, students need personalized support from colleges and universities in order to successfully re-enroll and continue their pathway to a degree."**
> Carrie Lockhert, *Associate Vice President of Partner Success*, InsideTrack

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[1] Author's calculation from U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, (2018) Table S150: Educational attainment.

This project had four primary goals: (1) to assemble an inventory of existing programs; (2) to develop a typology of these programs across important contextual domains; (3) to compile a brief literature review of existing research on strategies to support adult learners and some college, no degree students; and (4) to identify actionable opportunities for research, philanthropy, and policy or practice. This executive summary focuses on the first two goals and additionally presents and describes a third deliverable: a map of programs included in the inventory and typology.

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Each of these full products are attached separately and described in detail below. Insights and opportunities garnered from each product are also included. Additionally, goals three and four (the literature review and opportunities list) are below, beginning on page 8.

Inventory

The Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory is a representative list of individual programs and common strategies that states, regions, and institutions have adopted to serve adult learners and some college, no degree students across a variety of levels, contexts, and resources. The inventory currently captures 83 programs and 15 strategies which were drawn from internet searches, news articles, policy briefs, and reports.[2] While the inventory is not exhaustive and may be expanded, it is mean to be representative, and saturation was achieved (Guest et al., 2006). That is, additional programs were added until the same program type/design or resource barrier was targeted (e.g., similar and repeated institutional financial aid programs). The inventory captures the following 15 data points for each program:

- Name
- Start Year
- Administrative Location (City, State)
- Level of Service: State, region (city), region (other, e.g., multi-county), institution
- Locale(s) Served: Statewide, city, suburb, town, or rural
- Context (Audience): Adult learners, some college, no degree students, or both

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[2] To supplement the author's and advisors' knowledge of programs, a series of internet searches were conducted that included combinations of the following terms: adult, some college, no degree, program, services, higher education, degree. Each state name was also added separately to searches. A snowball approach was also used, wherein articles or reports led to names or information on additional programs. Listings from national organizations (e.g., the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, the Graduate! Network, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center) were also consulted.

- Resource Provided or Barrier Targeted: Academic/transfer, financial, informational, multiple, or other
- Strategy or Intended Outcome: (Re)Engage, succeed, or both
- Description of Program
- Eligibility Criterion (if applicable)
- Funding Source(s) and Level for Program
- Supports or Strategies: Specific resources provided or practices employed
- Program Outcomes (if available)
- Equity Focus (Yes/No): Program parameters or language target formerly incarcerated, low-income, older, racial minority, or underserved populations.[3]
- Systems Approach (Yes/No): Program design or implementation carries a systems-level approach (e.g., learning, lifecycle, rethink/redesign).[4]

Additionally, the inventory captures the state and/or zip code(s) served by the program and a list of webpages for reference and additional information on each program.

Of all programs in the inventory, 43% are state-level, and 41% are provided by institutions (or systems), with the remaining 16% offered at some regional level. For non-statewide programs, 12% serve a rural locale in some way. Most programs target some college, no degree students (51%), with 18% targeting adult learners specifically and 31% targeting both populations. Multiple resources or barriers are deployed/targeted most often (41%), with academic/transfer, financial, and informational representing roughly equal portions thereafter (18-20%). Most programs focus on the engagement or re-engagement of students (59%), with a small minority targeting success or degree completion alone (8%). Many programs (33%), however, take a more holistic approach and include (re)engagement plus success strategies. Only 47% of programs list any realized or intended outcomes. This might be due in part to the recency of many programs. The modal start year is 2018, with 59% of programs started in 2015 or later. Fourteen programs (17%) have some equity focus and 30% ($n=25$) could be considered as having adopted a systems approach. Systems-identified programs are distributed among learning (built-in or recurring programmatic assessments, modifications, and sharing of best practices), lifecycle (targeting the entire cycle of adult learners' and some college, no degree students' engagement with higher education, from search and application through degree attainment, including multiple contexts: academic, financial, and informational), and rethinking/redesigning (a reimagination or restructuring of programs, policies, or traditional methods of learning or support).

While these descriptive features of programs included in the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory are helpful to understanding the extent and scope of existing strategies, considering the intersection of many of these factors via a typology is particularly helpful to begin answering "what works."

Typology

Typologies are ways of numerically or visually bringing order to "related but seemingly disparate policies and programs" (Perna & Leigh, 2017, p. 156). In this way, typologies can help identify common practices or features across important program domains (Richards, 1988).

[3,4] These distinctions were made by the author alone given their programmatic understanding.

The Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Typology (previewed below) categorizes the 83 programs from the Inventory across two primary domains: Strategy (to engage/re-engage, succeed, or both) and Solution (with informational, financial, academic, or multiple tools). These primary intersections can be viewed below. For example, the 18 programs in the upper left box are programs seeking to (re)engage adult learners or some college, no degree students with informational interventions or resources. Likewise, the 25 programs in the lower right box use multiple strategies to support students from engagement/re-engagement through degree completion (success).

The typology also captures important information within each primary intersection, including:

- Audience (Shape): Whether the program focuses on adults; some college, no degree students; or both. These differences are exhibited by the square, triangle, and circle shapes, respectively.
- Location (Color): Programmatic reach is designated by color, with statewide programs in blue, regional (metropolitan, county, and city) programs in green, and institutional or system programs in yellow. Programs across any level that serve a rural area are shown in purple.
- Specialty (Border): A bold, dashed outline for each shape signifies whether the program has an equity-minded focus (described above, in teal) or employs a systems-based approach (in orange)—or both.

Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Typology
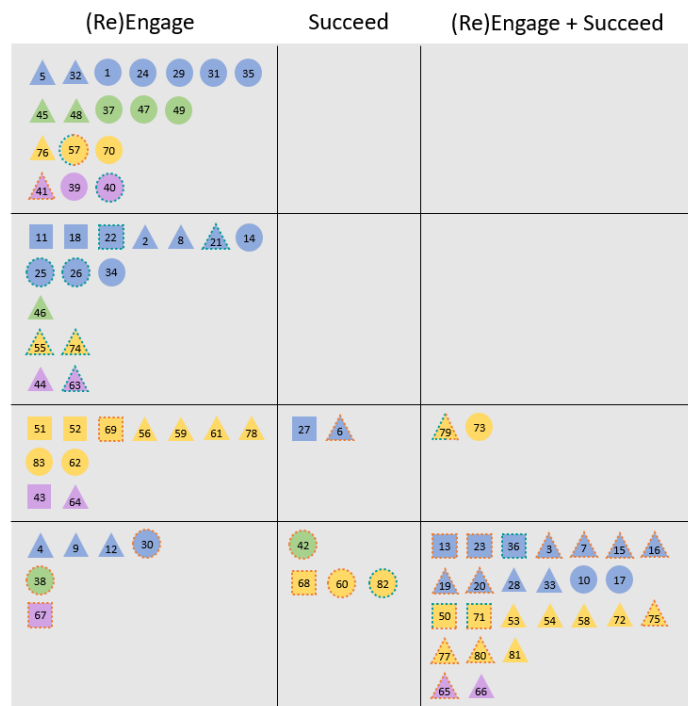
Taylor Odle, SREE Summer Fellow, todle@upenn.edu

Overall, programs clustered well, with a critical mass represented in cells where programs exist. Only two intersections have less than four programs, and no cells represent only one type of program (i.e., there is a diversity of audiences, location, and specialties in each). Even this simple typology provides important insights into the commonalities and differences among programs serving adult learners or some college, no degree students. Three observations seem immediately apparent:

1. **Information and financial aid are necessary but insufficient supports to propel students through degree attainment.** This can be seen by the "L" shape of programs across the typology whereby programs that incorporated completion-minded strategies relied upon the addition of academic or multiple solutions. Zero programs solely relying on informational or financial solutions focused on success—only on (re)engagement. Success strategies required the introduction of academic supports (e.g., academic advisors or coaches, credit for prior learning, and flexible degree programs). This suggests strategies to (re)engage and succeed adult learners or some college, no degree students must consider academic supports as part of a comprehensive suite of solutions.

2. **Institutional engagement is crucial to student success.** Institutions (in yellow) are well represented across the (re)engage, succeed, and (re)engage + succeed strategies but are particularly clustered in the academic and multiple solution categories. While it is unsurprising that institutions may be best poised to deliver or provide academic solutions, this clustering may suggest that institutions (or, at a state level, systems of institutions) are at an ideal level to provide informational, financial, and academic or other solutions for adult learners or some college, no degree students. Conversely, most regional programs (in green) focus predominantly on (re)engagement rather than success. This suggests strategies to (re)engage and succeed adult learners or some college, no degree students must—at a minimum—involve the institutions wherein these students enroll.

3. **Comprehensive approaches most often employ equity-minded and systems-based strategies.** Equity (teal-bordered) and systems-based (orange-bordered) approaches designated in the Inventory occur most frequently in the lower right area: the (re)engage + succeed strategy and multiple solution intersection. This suggests supports to propel adult learners and some college, no degree students to postsecondary education and through a degree likely require both (1) a focus on serving students from underrepresented, low-income, formerly incarcerated, or other backgrounds and (2) the delivery of those solutions through a comprehensive, systems-based approach.

While other insights can be garnered, the Typology can also be used to identify opportunities for existing or new programs. One possible avenue for existing programs in the lower left and lower middle boxes—programs that include multiple solutions but focus on either just (re)engagement *or* success—could be a shift toward comprehensive (re)engagement + success strategies given that they already employ multiple solutions. This could be through the added focus on a new outcome or a partnership with an existing organization to provide holistic support. For new programs, the 25 programs in the (re)engage + succeed strategy and multiple solution intersection (lower right) may serve as strong models given their holistic focus and

comprehensive strategy. An analysis of the design, operation, and success of these programs—and their incorporation of equity-mindedness or systems-based approaches—may be helpful.
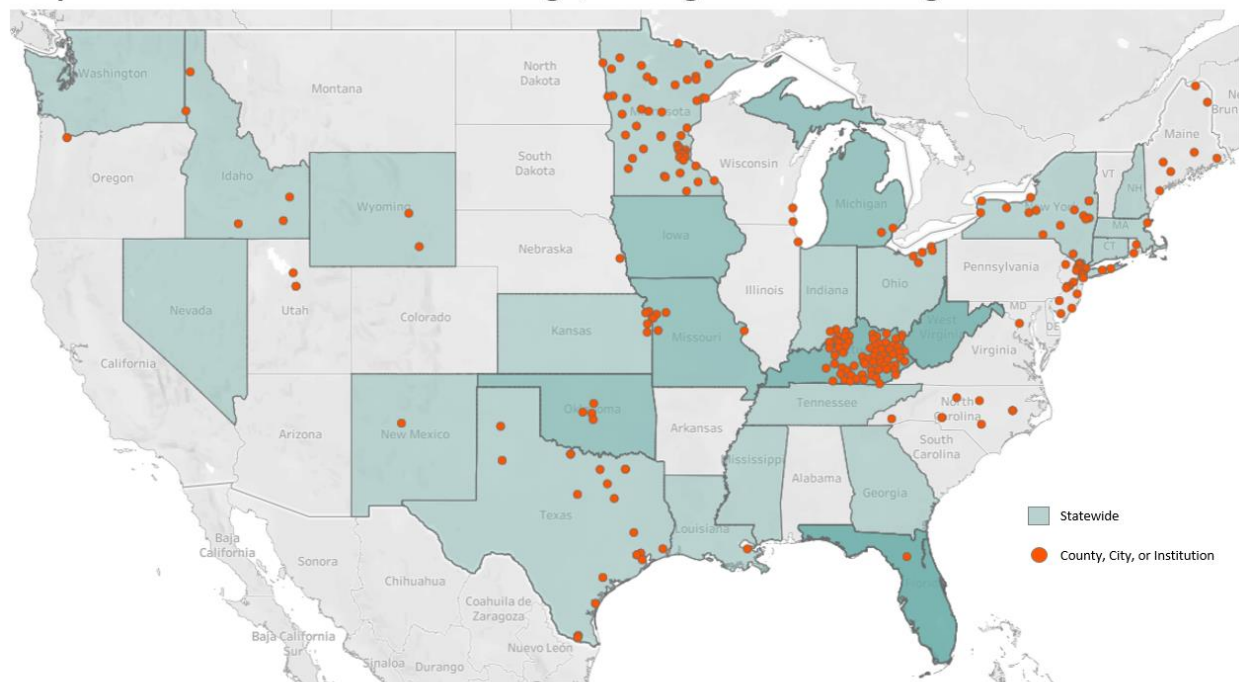
While the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Typology captures the location of programs by identify their state, regional (including rural), or institutional focus, a map of these programs is helpful to view the geographic reach of these programs.

Map

The Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Programs Map (previewed below, also available online via Tableau) uses state names and zip codes from the Inventory to locate state, regional, and institutional programs across the United States.

Depicted below, statewide programs are shaded in teal while local programs are identified with orange circles.[4] States' shading intensity increases with the presence of additional statewide programs (e.g., an existing financial aid program and a separate informational campaign), as seen in Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, and West Virginia. For metropolitan or regional programs, each respective city or county contained therein is mapped. For city and county programs, the zip code of the administrative seat of the city or county was used for mapping. For institutional programs, the zip code of the institution itself was used. For systemwide programs (e.g., University of Maine), each campus in the system is mapped.

Map of Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Programs

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[4] One program from the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory is not mapped: #45. SREB Adult Learner Portal. This program is currently inactive.

As noted, the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory is a representative but not exhaustive list. A lack of shading for a state does not necessarily mean the state does not have supports for adult learners or some college, no degree students. Conversely, a state with shading does not mean that it has a strong support system for these students. The presence of any program (e.g., an adult learner portal administered by a government agency) would "shade" the state here. Even with these caveats, the Map clearly identifies areas that are likely to have a high level of support for adult learners or some college, no degree students and areas with little to no support.

Much of the Great Plains/Midwest and Southeast/Mid-Atlantic regions had zero programs identified at the state level and few or no local programs. These areas are also characterized by a high degree of rurality, higher poverty rates, low postsecondary education attainment rates, and host many of the nation's education deserts, areas where access to postsecondary opportunities are already limited (Hillman, 2016; Ratcliffe et al., 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In total, there are 14 states without a single statewide, local, or institutional program identified in the Inventory. Yet even in states with programs, many still lack local or institutional/system-level supports for students once enrolled as evidenced by shaded states without county, city, or institutional programs within (i.e., teal states with no orange dots within). Even for local programs, most are concentrated in urban or metropolitan areas within states (e.g., programs in both Missouri and Kansas are clustered around Kansas City alone), with exception of the Appalachian corridor in eastern Kentucky. Some states, however, like Minnesota and New York, appear to have a strong mix of statewide and local programs distributed across the state to support adult learners or some college, no degree students. This may help "localize" their existing state strategies and deliver contextually relevant supports.

Advising and Coaching, Financial Aid, and
Information and Outreach

Prospective college students face a variety of barriers along their journey to pursue and attain a postsecondary credential. Adult learners and some college, no degree students are no exception. Long and Riley (2007) outlined three key barriers to college access in the United States: academic preparation, financial aid, and information. Adult learners and some college, no degree students may additionally face a host of other barriers, such as: caring for a parent, spouse, or dependent; balancing multiple life roles, including work and school; difficulty accessing community or institutional resources; and more (Hutchens, 2016; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013). These barriers persist beyond access. Given these common barriers shared by students, a robust body of literature has documented the effects of policies and programs seeking to reduce their negative impacts on students' enrollment and completion. This includes evidence on advising and coaching strategies, financial aid programs, and targeted information and outreach interventions. It is important to note, however, that adult learners often respond differently to access and success interventions than their "traditional" peers given their unique contexts, and, for some college, no degree students, prior experiences in higher education.

Despite the fact that more than one quarter (26.6%) of all undergraduate students in 2017 were over the age of 25,[5] research has largely failed to focus on the retention and completion rates of these "adult" or "non-traditional" students specifically. This is particularly the case for research on and evaluations of existing strategies to support these students *to and through* a postsecondary credential. This is likely due to a variety of factors. First, many programs are provided at a local or regional level by a non-educational or educational-adjacent entity, making systematic tracking of students for the purposes of research particularly difficult. Second, a strong policy focus on the adult learner population and their some college, no degree peers is also a relatively recent phenomenon, limiting the period for which outcomes under a policy or program could be observed or would have been expected to have changed. Indeed, the modal start year for programs in the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Programs Inventory is 2018, with 59% started in 2015 or later. Third, given that 41% of the programs in the Inventory are offered at the institutional level, this may also limit the generalizability of findings from any such study given different student, institutional, or academic contexts. Yet, while research on the adult learner and some college, no degree student populations is sparse, a robust body of literature has documented the short- and long-run impacts of many common strategies to support these groups across other student contexts (i.e., among their "traditional" peers).

Included below is a brief summary of research on the existing research on policies and programs geared toward (re)engaging and succeeding adult learners and some college, no degree students, as well as a summary of research on the access and success strategies broadly. The review is organized around the three primary strategies identified by the Inventory and Typology: Advising and Coaching, Financial Aid, and Information and Outreach. This review is representative, not exhaustive. For future research, a variety of opportunities to evaluate past,

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[5] Author's calculation from U.S. Department of Education (2019).

current, and developing programs across state, system, and institutional levels are identified in the Opportunities section, which begins on page 14.

One important factor of note that is largely missing from most research on policies and programs geared toward (re)engaging and succeeding adult learners and some college, no degree students, as well as a research on the access and success strategies broadly, is the application or consideration of an explicit benefit-cost framework. Few studies do strong jobs of comparing intervention costs to net present benefits or outcomes (e.g., cost of scholarship or program per student versus value of an additional degree; Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Castleman & Page, 2015; Evans et al., 2020; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Page et al., 2019). A systematic incorporation of benefit-cost frameworks into future research would greatly aid cost-effectiveness considerations, particularly as organizations or policymakers consider scaling new or existing strategies (Belfield & Bowden, 2019; Levin et al., 2017).

Advising and Coaching

Many college access and success support strategies involving advising, coaching, mentoring, or similar interventions have been linked to increased college enrollment and retention rates, particularly for students from racial minority groups (Avery et al., 2014; Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013; Hurwitz & Howell, 2014). This has been the case for broadly available supports as well as those targeted specifically to individuals or groups (Bettinger et al., 2012; Owen, 2012). Considering the combination of advising, coaching, or other supports with financial aid, for example, as a *comprehensive* retention and success strategy is particularly important. Evans et al. (2020) used a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the efficacy of an intensive case-management program paired with emergency financial aid for low-income students at community colleges. Among women, the combination of case management and financial aid tripled associate degree attainment (a 31-percentage point increase), but the treatment arm providing only financial aid had no effect. This supports notions derived from the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Programs Typology suggesting any one mechanism alone is likely insufficient to support students to and through a credential. Indeed, in Angrist et al.'s (2009) evaluation of a program providing peer groups and organized study sessions to all students at a four-year institution found the largest impacts on GPA and credit attainment occurred when services were combined with financial aid. Another study examining the impact of a need-based grant combined with mentoring and career guidance raised completion rates for students at one university by 5 percentage points (Clotfelter et al., 2018).

Yet, while adult learners (age 25 and over) represent over one quarter of all undergraduates (26.6%), they are overrepresented at two-year institutions.[6] Among public institutions, adults comprise nearly one third (32.7%) of enrollments at two-year colleges but only 18.6% at four-year universities.[7] While community colleges provide viable paths toward postsecondary credentials, Deming (2017) notes that "less-selective public institutions [like community colleges] often have large classes and provide little in the way of academic counseling, mentoring, and other student supports" (p. 6). This likely limits students' access to such comprehensive engagement and completion strategies. Indeed, in their analysis of the *National Survey of Students in Continuing Education*, Sarah Turner and colleagues observed that "most

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[6,7] Author's calculation from U.S. Department of Education (2019).

institutions surveyed did not provide academic services beyond regular office hours; nor did they offer them online" (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 7).

"Few factors influence adult learners' success more than student/institutional planning and counseling. Mapping the student's path to postsecondary success is crucial" (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 4). Using an institutional case study, Kaltenbaugh (2017) found a mentoring program designed to strengthen adult students' transition to college and found that students in peer groups had higher enrollment and retention rates. In a 2010 summary of research studies on mentoring college students published between 1990 and 2007, Crisp and Cruz (2009) found only one study focused on non-traditional students (i.e., Langer, 2001) and called for more work in this area. Indeed, while few studies have examined advising provided to adult learners, many have considered the impacts of professional and peer advising on students' college-going and retention outcomes. Bettinger and Evans (2019) found that a "near-peer" (i.e., similarly aged peer) advising intervention improved the college application and enrollment rates (at two-year institutions) of Hispanic and low-income students by 2-3 percentage points. A similar evaluation on Bottom Lone, a social support and advising program, found that counseling students through the college application and financial aid process found positive effects on early college persistence for low-income students (Castleman & Goodman, 2018). While these programs are often provided at the school- or institution-level, their generalizability is limited as institutional contexts increasingly diversify, and subsequent evaluations of similar programs have produced small or null results (e.g., Oreopoulos et al., 2019; Scrivener & Weiss, 2009).

In the adult learner and some college, no degree student space, InsideTrack is a common tool used to (re)engage and support students. Bettinger and Baker (2014) used a randomized experiment to evaluate the effects of InsideTrack's coaching service on students' persistence and retention at public, private, and proprietary universities, were a majority of participants were nontraditional students. The authors found students assigned to coaching were more likely to be retained at 6 and 12 months by approximately 5 percentage points compared to the control group and were roughly 4 points more likely to complete a degree overall.

Financial Aid

Financial aid influences a variety of student outcomes, including college enrollment and retention, degree attainment, debt, earnings, and post-college welfare (Bettinger et al., 2019; Denning et al., 2019; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2019; Page et al., 2017; Scott-Clayton & Zafar, 2016). Summarizing a group of studies, Deming and Dynarski (2010) found that reducing college costs by $1,000 increased the likelihood of enrollment by 4 percentage points on average, and, in a recent meta-analysis, Nguyen et al. (2019) found that aid also improved average persistence and attainment rates by 1.5 to 2 percentage points. Recent studies have also documented how the receipt of aid reduces students' borrowing and increases post-college earnings, home ownership, and financial health (Chapman, 2016; Evans & Nguyen, 2019; Marx & Turner, 2018; Scott-Clayton & Zafar, 2016).

The magnitude of these effects, however, largely vary along several dimensions, including (a) how aid is delivered and (b) who receives that aid. First, program design matters. Merit programs typically producing weaker effects than need-based programs (Domina, 2014; Herbaut & Geven,

2020; Nguyen et al., 2019), and evaluations of large merit programs have documented how the scholarships may disproportionately benefit students from higher-income families, increasing racial and socioeconomic gaps in college-going (Dynarski, 2000; Fitzpatrick & Jones, 2016; Sjoquist & Winters, 2012). This in turn has little to no impact overall given that they serve students who are, on average, already college-bound. Large-scale shifts by states from a focus on need-based programs to ones conditioned on merit jeopardize a prevailing goal of financial aid: to reduce affordability constraints so that enrollment is possible *for students who would have otherwise not enrolled* (Dynarski, 2004; Long & Riley, 2007). Second, financial aid does not have an equal impact across student groups. Indeed, prior studies have observed stronger effects, particularly for need-based aid programs, among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds or across racial/ethnic groups (Bettinger, 2004; Flores, 2010; Kim, 2012; Turner, 2004). This again suggests that aid matters most for students who stand the most to benefit (i.e., those with larger affordability constraints or groups without equal access to educational opportunities).

Considering adult students specifically, Barr (2019) found the Post-9/11 GI Bill increased degree attainment by roughly 0.4 percentage points per $1,000 of aid. The aggregate increase in aid corresponded to an approximately 5-6 percentage point increase in attainment overall. Also at the federal level, LaLumia (2012) found no effect of the Lifetime Learning tax credit or the tuition deduction on college attendance of individuals in their 30s and 40s, yet Seftor and Turner (2002) observed large effects of the Pell Grant on older (age 22-35) and nontraditional students' enrollment rates by 1.3-1.5 percentage points. This suggests direct aid—rather than tax incentives—may be more impactful for adult learners. Considering a program across eight institutions, Barrow et al. (2014) used a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the effectiveness of a $1,000 per semester performance-based scholarship for low-income adults on persistence and academic performance at community colleges. The authors found the program, which required students to enroll at least half-time and maintain a C or better average, increased subsequent enrollment rates by 15-18 percentage points and improved second semester GPAs by 0.07-0.36 points. Students given the scholarship also earned 3.69 more credits on average than students in the control group. Evidence on performance-based scholarships for adult students is, however, mixed. A host of other studies have generally found small impacts on attendance and full-time enrollment for adult-focused performance-based scholarships yet no meaningful changes in degree completion (e.g., Mayer et al., 2016), and Gurantz (2019) generally found no impact of California's robust Cal Grant program for adult students' degree completion outcomes, employment, or earnings. The one exception in Gurantz (2019) was that he did observe positive effects—a four percentage point increase in earning a bachelor's degree—for students in for-profit institutions. Among these studies, the evidence presented on the effects of financial aid on adult and "non-traditional" students seems mixed. This again supports notions derived from the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Programs Typology (i.e., that financial aid is a necessary but insufficient condition for success).

In all, financial aid is an effective mechanism to improve students' immediate and long-run college outcomes (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016), but policymakers and program administrators should take care in the design of such programs to ensure funds are used efficiently and in a manner that "works" they seek to target. When possible, financial aid should also be paired with other retention and completion strategies.

Information and Outreach

Providing information on college options, financial aid, and returns to a college degree generally increase students' applications to and enrollment in higher education, as well as their applications for scholarships and aid (Andrews et al., 2010; Castleman & Page, 2015; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Oreopoulos & Dunn, 2013; Ross et al., 2013). While studies on these interventions typically focus on more traditional college pathways (e.g., enrollment directly from high school), informational supports may be particularly important for adult learners and returning students with some college credits but no degree. Sarah Turner and colleagues observed that "adult learners often begin with an information deficit" and that "many factors contribute to [that] information deficit" (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 7). Yet, as Perna (2006) notes, "simply making information available is insufficient" (p. 1632). This is particularly the case for students who are African American, Hispanic, low-income, or first-generation (Lunda De La Rosa, 2006)—and adult or "non-traditional" students are no different.

Studying an informational intervention that included videos on the returns to a degree paired with a financial aid calculator, Oreopoulos and Dunn (2013) found that treated students better understood the net benefits of a credential, expressed lower concerns about costs, and indicated a greater likelihood of earning a degree. Similarly simple interventions, like a $6 per student packet with customized information on the application process and college costs combined with an application fee waiver, have been found to improve students' application to and enrollment in selective institutions—particularly among low-income students (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Outside the traditional school or campus spaces, Bettinger et al. (2012) randomized families receiving tax assistance from H&R Block into groups that received (a) assistance completing the FAFSA plus additional (aid-related) information, (b) information on financial aid, including eligibility estimates, and college costs, or (c) a brochure on the benefits of college and average college costs (the control group). For independent students, the group receiving FAFSA assistance were more likely than those just receiving brochures to file a FAFSA and receive a Pell Grant. Among dependent students, those in the treatment group were also 26% more likely to attend college than those in the control group. Similarly, Castleman et al. (2015) used a randomized controlled trial to evaluate high-school and university outreach on students' transition to college. They found that proactive outreach from college-based counselors improved college enrollment rates of Hispanic students.

A growing body of evidence investigates low-touch informational interventions, or "nudges" (e.g., Castleman & Page, 2015, 2016 in the higher education literature) While many positive effects have been observed, nudges may be most effective when they are well timed, include information that is contextually relevant, and include simple, task-oriented recommendations (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Within the nudge realm, prior studies have found that nudges focused on administrative processes (e.g., to complete a form or register) are more impactful on student behavior than general nudges encouraging the use of academic or social supports (Page et al., 2020). Among adults, however, Chande et al. (2014) found sustained attendance rates in adult education programs deteriorated after the first 10 weeks (with approximately 25% lost) but that simple text messages provided through a randomized control trial with (a) positive feedback and encouragement, (b) planning and organization tips, and (c) that identified social support resources reduced the proportion of students that stopped attending by 36% compared to the

control group. Castleman and Meyer (2020) similarly found that a text-message campaign that provided simplified information, encouragement, and access to individualized advising to already-enrolled students improved students' credits attempted and completed, GPA, and persistence. The authors noted "this evidence suggests colleges play an important role communicating information about academic expectations, support resources, and norms" (Castleman & Meyer, 2020, p. 1126). Indeed, Harms (2013) found that 76% of potential adult undergraduate students and 84% of adult graduate students predominantly gather information about attending a college or university from the institutions' websites themselves.

While many nudge interventions produce positive outcomes given relatively low costs, scaling these interventions is logistically feasible (and attractive), but attaining similarly scaled outcomes is difficult. In a scaled nudge campaign that reached 800,000 students, Bird et al. (2019) found no impacts on college enrollment across any student subgroups. While the delivery method, population, and framing of nudges is important, the authors hypothesized one of the most important factors linking nudges to improved outcomes observed in prior studies was local relationships (e.g., student to a familiar organization or individual, rather than student to "state"). The authors therefore advocate for a localized rather than global nudge approach. Indeed, more recent and larger nudge-based interventions have shown precisely zero effects (Gurantz et al., forthcoming; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2019), including one study on a text-message intervention for students enrolled in online coursework (Oreopoulos et al., 2019). Just as targeted outreach is likely most impactful as one component of a comprehensive access and success strategy, nudges too may be important yet individually insufficient tools to support adult learners and some college, no degree students.

Programs, Policy, and Research

While many programs have been introduced in recent years to support adult learners and some college, no degree students in their pursuit of a postsecondary credential, it is clear more are needed. The Typology and Map corresponding to the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory identified clear gaps in services and resources by audience and location, with few existing programs leveraging multiple strategies to comprehensively support students *to and through* a postsecondary credential. Even fewer programs incorporated equity-minded and systems-based approaches to respond to the nation's growing diversity and to promote sustained change (e.g., Frey, 2018; Stewart & Ayres, 2001). Even at a basic level, there are more than twice as many adults today having stopped out of college with some credits but no degree than there are current undergraduates in the United States.[7] This not only presents institutional, regional, and state programs with capacity constraints as they work to (re)engage and support adult learners and some college, no degree students, but it underscores a pressing need to identify and scale programs that "work."

To further build a robust body of evidence on effective practice supporting adult learners and some college, no degree students, action supported by strong research is needed on both programmatic and policy fronts. What follows are a collection of opportunities: existing programs to be scaled, piloted in new locations, or investigated further; emerging policies to be considered, promoted, and enacted across a range of contexts; and new research studies to be designed and carried out. The knowledge acquired across any one area stands to inform the others and to advance research and practice in the adult learner and some college, no degree student arena.

Programs

The programs identified below were selected by the author from the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory and Typology as either potential exemplars for scaling or re-deployment in new areas or as emerging practices that may warrant further investigation. Many have promising descriptive evidence on their efficacy, focus on (re)engaging *and* succeeding students, and may incorporate an equity-minded and/or system-based approach. Seven programs have been grouped into three broad categories: reimagining postsecondary spaces, strengthening pathways from GED® to college, and promoting success "to and through." Further information on each program is linked and available via the Inventory or Typology.

Reimagining Postsecondary Spaces

Built from success of the [Bard Prison Initiative](#), [Bard Microcollege](#) is a full-scholarship, degree-granting program offered in Brooklyn's Central Library in the city of New York. Seminars are small and offered every day of the week, and students have access to all library resources. While

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[7] Author's calculations. Shapiro et al. (2019) counted 36 million Americans with some college, no degree, and the U.S. Department of Education (2019) reported 16.8 million undergraduates were enrolled in Fall 2017.

this microcollege launched in 2018, Bard's first microcollege began in 2016 in Holyoke, MA, where approximately 20 students graduate annually from the associate degree program.

© Bard at BPL: https://www.bklynlibrary.org/adult-learning/bard-microcollege

College Unbound (CU) was founded in 2009 and is a regionally accredited, non-profit, degree-granting college for adults in Providence, RI who have some college credits but faced barriers to completing a bachelor's degree. CU meets on a high school campus once weekly at night (other courses are online) and operates an on-site prison education program. CU boasts a 78% fall-to-spring retention rate and a 75% completion rate within 4 years.

- College Unbound's 2017-2021 Strategic Plan
- The American Council on Education's Case Study on College Unbound
- The Capacity Group, LLC's Feasibility Study of College Unbound

© College Unbound: https://www.collegeunbound.org/

[Keys to Degrees](#) is a holistic education model for single parents and children where both generations are enrolled full time in an educational program; parents pursue a postsecondary degree while children receive early-childhood and elementary education. Families live on-campus or in community housing. Keys to Degrees operates across five communities in the United States. While cohorts are small (5-10 parents), graduation rates are high (50-70%).

- Keys to Degrees [Replication Evaluation Report](#) for W. K. Kellogg Foundation
- The [Core Components](#) of Keys to Degrees

© Endicott College: https://collegewithkids.org/partners-affiliated-projects/

Strengthening Pathways from GED® to College

The [Nevada-Accelerated Career Education (NV-ACE) Project](#) launched in 2019 and allows adult learners to complete their high school equivalency and concurrently enroll in college courses that lead to industry-recognized credentials and postsecondary certificates. Adults receive academic advising, supplemental basic skills instruction, and assistance with the college application and admissions process—and may also receive assistance with transportation, uniforms, supplies, and other services as needed. The program currently has an enrollment of 50 students.

> **"The traditional sequential method of completing adult education and entering postsecondary education simply takes too long."**
> Nancy Olsen, *Adult Education Programs Supervisor*
> Nevada Department of Education

[GED PLUS](#) is a joint initiative by Kentucky Community and Technical College System and Kentucky Skills U where students can co-enroll to concurrently earn a GED® and a college certificate in four months or less. GED PLUS is structured to leverage the [Kentucky Work Ready Scholarship](#) so that all courses are tuition free and focus on an in-demand field. Students receive one-on-one support from program staff.

Promoting Success "To and Through"

Utah Valley University began their [Some College, No Degree Initiative](#) in 2016. The comprehensive reengagement and success program included an outreach campaign, retention mentors (part-time peer advisors), expedited readmission (waived application fee), mandatory advising appointments, and need-based gap funding (Returning Wolverine Grants). For a pilot, 3,500 students (from 15,000) were identified as having more than 90 credits but had not attended within 7 semesters (since 2009) or earned a degree from another institution. Of those students, 232 re-enrolled, 66 were awarded grants, and 25 graduated. Since then, nearly 600 students have re-enrolled, and 125 have graduated.

Launched in 2018, [Return to the U](#) is the University of Utah's reengagement and transfer success program for some college, no degree students. In addition to a targeted outreach campaign and $1,000 scholarships, the program provides information on academic programs, financial aid, and campus support services (including military benefits) for re-engaging former U of U students and includes a transfer guide for students from other institutions. Everyone is paired with a Return to the U advocate, and the program offers specific "pathways to completion," which are short and flexible majors that are offered through online, evening, and accelerated courses. In the first year of operation, the outreach campaign had an 83% delivery rate of targeted e-materials, with 25%

opens. 170 students later met with an advisor, 108 were admitted and enrolled, and 30 had declared a major.

Policy

While specific programs appear effective at supporting adult learners and some college, no degree students to and through a postsecondary credential, there are also broad practices that states and systems can adopt to support these student groups. Below is a collection of such practices in three domains: using state funds to support localized strategies; simplifying the credit-accumulation process; and promoting strategic and coordinated, yet flexible approaches. These practices are detailed further in the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory and Typology and represent unique ways states and systems can leverage existing resources, use their administrative authority to reduce barriers to (re)enrollment and completion, and maintain policy focus on supporting adult learners and some college, no degree students while still allowing local or institutional missions to thrive.

Kentucky's GED PLUS program described above is a strong example of the benefit of policy coordination. The program not only represents an innovation that connects GED students to postsecondary credentials and supports them with coaches, but the program also leverages existing state resources which make the program free to participants (Kentucky Work Ready Scholarship). It is apparent that many programs in the Adult Learner and Some College, No Degree Student Program Inventory have singular focuses, providing information or financial aid for example, while others offer fully comprehensive services. While full-service programs may appear hard to scale, **collaborations between organizations or synergies among existing strategies may represent an effective way to scale programs that can comprehensively support adult learners and some college, no degree students**.

Using State Funds to Support Localized Strategies

At least two states have explicit programs that provide state funds for local and regional educational and workforce development programs. Bridges to College (MA) began in 2013 and is a grant program for agencies or organizations that support adult college transition services focused on increasing the number of low-income, underrepresented, and entry-level adult workers who enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Bridges to College funds programs leading to college entrance, retention, and success that have achieved recognized success in bridging academic gaps of underserved adult learner populations. Examples of recently funded programs include Bristol Community College's Bridges to College Transition program and the

El Centro del Cardinal Boston program, which focuses on providing low-income adult immigrants with educational services.

In 2018, Iowa began a similar program, the Employer Innovation Fund. The matched-funding program is designed to support employers, community leaders, and others in leading efforts for developing regional workforce talent pools via credit or non-credit education opportunities in high-demand jobs. Examples of recently funded programs include the Central College-Pella Talent Pipeline Apprenticeship School, including financial support and wrap-around services for students pursuing apprenticeships, and The Well, an 18-month educational program for individuals facing barriers to successfully re-integrating into the workforce.

Simplifying the Credit-Accumulation Process

Adult learners and some college, no degree students face similar access and completion challenges as their "traditional" peers. Yet they may also face a host of additional barriers: caring for a parent, spouse, or dependent; balancing multiple life roles, including work and school; difficulty accessing community or institutional resources; and more (Hutchens, 2016; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013). Ensuring that the courses they have paid for, successfully completed, and earned credit for "check" the correct boxes toward earning a degree need not be an additional hurdle. Many states have recognized this barrier and taken administrative steps toward ensuring that earned credits count toward a degree—and may even further combine sets of previously-earned credits to award a new credential.

The Degrees When Due project is an example of this "credit reclamation" movement to simply the credit-accumulation and degree-conferral process. Degrees When Due and the related Project Win-Win have collectively produced over 20,000 new associate degrees across 556 institutions in 17 states. Many states have also developed more tailored programs to provide comprehensive services to students who are within a few credits of a such a degree, including Mississippi's Complete 2 Compete initiative, which provides outreach, coaching, and financial aid for students who do not immediately qualify for a degree upon an audit of existing credits. Mississippi's program has produced nearly 2,000 degrees and currently enrolls over 1,400 more students.

© IHEP: https://degreeswhendue.com/#

At the institutional level, many universities have worked with regional accreditors to develop flexible baccalaureate degree programs that maximize prior credits. Students could expect to earn a degree in "General," "Interdisciplinary," "Liberal," "Multidisciplinary," or "University"

Studies or in "Social Science." These programs often allow students to work with an academic advisor or career coach to adapt an existing curriculum to meet their learning goals or to select classes that maximize their available time on campus or at home (online). Many programs may also be offered at an accelerated pace, set to complete in one year or less given prior credits.

While others exist, examples of these programs include:

Aggies at the Goal Line (North Carolina)   KCC Flex (New York)

DegreeNow! (West Virginia)   Multidisciplinary Studies (Nebraska)

End Zone Initiative (North Carolina)   Social Science (New Jersey)

General Studies (Wyoming)   University Studies (North Carolina, Maine)

Promoting Strategic and Coordinated, Yet Flexible Approaches

Just as states can support localized strategies to support educational attainment and workforce development, so too can higher education systems support their individual units with coordinated, yet flexible support. The University of North Carolina system has developed a comprehensive set of Adult Learner Initiatives which support five goals: improving student access through flexible delivery; leveraging UNC "system-ness" to deliver services and resources at scale; re-aligning services and policies to meet the needs of non-traditional learners; leveraging technology to improve student success and program efficiency; and facilitating statewide, cross-sector conversations about post-secondary attainment. Each of these goals has clear, actionable strategies. Yet, within the broad initiative, each campus has developed a program or set of resources to serve their unique adult learner population—from a part-time studies program at the flagship University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to a more comprehensive re-engagement and success strategy at the more remote Western Carolina University. By propelling campus-based programs with system-wide supports or initiatives, programs may be more likely to employ systems-based approaches. Further, the Adult Learner Initiatives at the UNC system have built-in mechanisms to encourage research and knowledge-sharing among campuses and to engage both state and regional employers which could be absent with siloed, campus-by-campus strategies.

> **"We partnered with InsideTrack not simply to re-enroll students, but also to prepare them for long-term success. The scalability and cost-effectiveness makes it compelling to move from pilot to wide scale implementation."**
> Eric Fotheringham, *Director of Strategic Academic Initiatives*
> University of North Carolina System

Also at the University of North Carolina, the system office partnered with InsideTrack to contact more than 2,000 stopped-out students from three campuses (East Carolina University, Fayetteville State University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte) and coached

those interested in completing their degrees through the process of re-enrolling and successfully resuming their studies. Re-enrollment coaches engaged stopped out students, identified their needs, and helped prepare them to resume studies while simultaneously providing actionable insights to campuses on barriers for students.

Other examples of strategic and coordinated actions to serve adult learners and some college, no degree students include implementation of the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning's Adult Learner 360™ (AL 360) tool or through the use of services from ReUP Education. Both seek to identify systematic, data-driven actions institutions can take to better serve students. The CUNY School of Professional Studies reported important insights from their implementation of AL 360, which led to the augmentation and restructuring of existing services.

Research

As noted in the Literature Review, research has largely failed to focus on the evaluation of existing strategies to support adult learners and some, college no degree students *to and through* a postsecondary credential. While a robust body of research has focused on common strategies to support students broadly (e.g., advising and financial aid), adults may not respond the same as their "traditional" peers—or may require more targeted or flexible interventions. The lack of research focused specifically on the costs and benefits of programs to support this student population has already negatively impacted legislative support for such programs in at least one state and could have prevented the elimination of two programs in another.

In California, the Governor's 2020-21 budget included $10 million in additional funding for "extended education" designed to develop more baccalaureate degree programs some college, no degree students; to expand existing high-quality certificate programs; and to provide direct outreached to students who had stopped out. The Legislative Analyst's Office recommend rejection of this proposal, noting:

> … the Governor has not clearly identified the root problems or explained how his proposals would remedy those problems. The Governor is also missing opportunities, such as with extended education …, to learn from recent expansion efforts—knowing little more today than a year or two ago about what is working. Without a better understanding of root issues, the Legislature could end up using money ineffectively (Petek, 2020, p. 2).

Regarding the extended education program specifically, the recommendations suggested the "core problem has not been clarified," that "a plethora of reentry programs already exist," and "why state funding is needed for extended education remains unclear" (Petek, 2020, pp. 69-70).

In Florida, the Governor vetoed a 2012, $2.5 million funding request to support the Florida Degree Completion Pilot. The pilot was to be coordinated by four institutions and intended to recruit, recover, and retain adults who had stopped out and assist them in completing an associate or bachelor's degree aligned with high-wage, high-skill workforce needs. In his veto letter, which focused heavily on efficiency and economic competitiveness in the wake of the Great

Recession, the Governor outlined his intention for funding to support programs to "improve learning gains, enhance or improve services that are targeted toward higher completion and placement rates, or to expand or improve programs that are directly tied to Florida's workforce need" (Scott, 2012, p. 3). Strong evidence on such recruitment and support practices—and their relative costs and benefits—may have supported such a legislative recommendation. Seven years later, the same Governor vetoed continued state funding ($29.4 million) for an existing program: Complete Florida. Complete Florida was an innovative statewide strategy to serve the state's more than 2.8 million some college, no degree residents. Since 2014, the program had produced over 1,700 graduates and boasted a 70% year-to-year retention rate.

Being equipped with research on programs serving adult learners and some college, no degree students does not mean that proponents could guarantee funding or secure continuous approval from governors and other policymakers. But, a lack of such evidence makes these programs more susceptible to legislative cuts and scrutiny. To effectively advocate for the piloting, evaluation, and scaling of state- and system-wide programs, rigorous research on the breadth of already existing programs is needed.

Below is a collection of 15 former and currently operating programs, and planned pilots, across state, system, and institutional levels whose evaluations may stand to greatly advance our understanding of the efficacy of programs to support adult learners and some college, no degree students. These programs were identified by the author as having promising descriptive evidence and clear interventions for impact studies. Each is also located within a state or system holding access to rich administrative data to allow for rigorous program evaluations. Outcomes of interest may include a host of variables—from re-enrollment and persistence through degree attainment and labor-market earnings.

State

Finish Up, Florida! (FUF) was a pilot launched in 2012 by the Florida College System (28 community and state colleges) designed to reconnect with students who had stopped or dropped out of college before degree completion. Students were contacted via direct mailers, and a website provided students with guidance through five main steps to re-enroll. A centralized team of two former college advisors worked to develop FUF teams on each campus to serve some college, no degree students and combine existing practices to best serve these students. The initiative reached out to over 87,000 students who had left within the past 2 years after completing 36 or more credits.

Complete Florida was a statewide initiative aimed at serving the state's 2.8 million some college, no degree adults. After completing a common application, students were paired with a success coach who remained with them "from application to graduation." Coaches would help with paperwork, coordinate efforts with institutions, assist with selecting degree programs/majors, help students with registration, answer questions regarding financial aid, provide career counseling, and more. Complete Florida was a "wrapper" for existing certificate, associate, or baccalaureate programs that are aligned to high-skill, high-wage, high-demand jobs. Students would take all classes online from respective institutions (who would grant their degrees) but would do so at a central Complete Florida website, where they would also engage with their coach and access other Complete Florida resources. The program also offered scholarships. Complete Florida serviced nearly 15,000 applications, supported over 11,000 students who engaged with coaches (nearly 62,000 coaching interactions), and awarded $1.6 million in scholarships. Over 3,600 students enrolled since 2014, 70% were retained year-over-year, and 1,700 had graduated as of 2018.

Similar programs to these, which could also support strong evaluations, include Georgia's Go Back. Move Ahead., Kentucky's Project Graduate, and Louisiana's CompleteLA.

System

Fresh Start at the City Colleges of Chicago is a four-year debt-forgiveness program aimed at the more than 21,000 former students who left in good academic standing to return, finish their degree, and leave debt-free. The pilot begins in Fall 2020 and will run through 2023. Under the plan, half of a student's outstanding debt with City Colleges would be forgiven if they remain enrolled and make satisfactory academic progress through the first term. The rest would be forgiven when they graduate—either with an associate degree or an advanced or basic certificate. Wayne State University's Warrior Way Back is a similar debt forgiveness program that launched in 2018. The program forgives up to $1,500 over three semesters or upon graduation. There are currently 76 active students, and 9 students have graduated through the program; 11 more graduates expected in 2020.

© Wayne State University: https://wayne.edu/warriorwayback/

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The suite of initiatives introduced by the University of North Carolina system described above also offers rich opportunities for research given the campus-by-campus implementation of separate (re)engagement and success strategies. Each of the six universities has at least one program to support adult learners and some college, no degree students, including:

- UNC Chapel Hill's Part-Time Classroom Studies program
- North Carolina A&T University's Aggies at the Goal Line initiative
- East Carolina University's B.S. in University Studies degree
- UNC Charlotte's 49er Finish Program
    - The program boasts over 1,000 graduates to date and 3 national awards.
- North Carolina Central University's End Zone Initiative
- The Finish Line at Western Carolina University
    - 94 bachelor's degrees have been conferred.

© UNC Charlotte: https://49erfinish.uncc.edu/

Further, the system reported that their partnership with InsideTrack for three campuses resulted in more than 1,200 former students engaging with a re-enrollment coach (of 2,000 contacted), with 62 enrolling as of June 2020. The system estimated a 10-15 times return on investment to the campuses from increased tuition revenue.

Institution

The Continuous Enrollment Initiative was a pilot among five Idaho community and technical colleges focused on making simple changes to key practices. Colleges delivered enhanced advising, mentoring, and remediation techniques; monitored student progress; and created support groups for almost 500 adult and some college, no degree students. The program leveraged intrusive, just-in-time advising; a college skills and success course; math and English tutoring; cohort peer groups; and accelerated remediation. Students were also provided with last-dollar scholarships. 70% of participants were retained after the first year, and remaining participants had higher average GPAs than peers after three years. Overall, 74% of credits attempted were completed, and 17% of participants earned a certificate or associate degree in 2 years. 100% of students who did *not* participate in the cohort program dropped out. Reports suggests that participants with mixed enrollment status were more successful at completing credits and had higher GPAs and retention rates than exclusively full- or part-time students.

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