

# Public Engagement and Outreach to Adult Learners

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# Executive summary

In 2021, Wilder Research and the Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) partnered on a project designed to deepen our understanding of adult learners across the state, including their experiences, the challenges they face, and ways OHE can better engage current and prospective adult learners. Wilder Research and OHE worked together to convene listening sessions, develop a communications toolkit, and build relationships with individuals and organizations who can provide insight into the experiences of adult learners and co-develop expanded ways to engage these learners. This report outlines key findings from those efforts, as well as suggestions for ways to modify existing policy and practice to better support adult learners.

## **Key findings:** **Literature review**

The literature review identified continuity in the barriers identified across regions, types of postsecondary education, and research methodologies. These barriers informed the framework for the successive phases of the project and include:

- ✓ The costs of postsecondary education can be too high for some individuals, particularly those with other financial commitments.
- ✓ The time commitment associated with obtaining postsecondary credentials can be challenging to balance with other scheduling demands.
- ✓ Adult learners may not see themselves reflected in existing narratives about postsecondary education.
- ✓ Adult learners may not see postsecondary credentials as a wise investment of time and money.

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## **Key findings:** **Listening sessions**

We conducted listening sessions that included 48 participants and produced over 20 hours of recorded conversations. We used an approach called ‘thematic analysis’ to analyze this qualitative data and identified seven salient themes:

- ✓ Adult learners need help navigating how to pay for postsecondary education.
- ✓ Adult learners are more likely to face increased barriers to enrollment and completion due to child care and family commitments (time and cost).
- ✓ Access to multiple modes and schedules for completing postsecondary education, and support for learners pursuing non-traditional modes and schedules is important to the success of adult learners.
- ✓ It may be useful for institutions and state agencies to bolster employer and industry partnerships to promote postsecondary education.
- ✓ Adult learners are interested in “getting the most” out of postsecondary education, from a financial and career fulfillment standpoint.
- ✓ Adult learners’ postsecondary goals are mismatched with traditional postsecondary structure and requirements.
- ✓ Outreach, communication, and relationship building efforts should be pursued to address the postsecondary narrative mismatch for adult learners.

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## Introduction

In 2015, the state of Minnesota enacted an educational attainment goal, setting a target that 70% of Minnesota adults will have completed a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2025. It was clear from the outset that this goal would not be reached without engaging historically underserved and underrepresented populations, namely adult learners, students who are Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC), and students from low-income households. Further, we know that postsecondary credentials are often an important part of the goals of individuals, as they are increasingly important to earning a living wage. Keeping in mind both the state and individual goals, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) set out to understand how to expand the ways in which they engage adult learners, particularly those from BIPOC communities and low-income households.

The information we gathered about the experiences of adult learners across all these approaches is outlined in this report. Many of these ideas will be familiar to OHE staff and partners – practitioners who engage with adult learners regularly have a level of wisdom and expertise gained from living the concepts discussed in this report. The goal of this report is not to uncover trends that will surprise practitioners, but instead to:

- Take stock of what we know by drawing on different qualitative and quantitative resources. What challenges do adult learners face? What solutions currently exist? What is the current landscape of organizations, programs, and initiatives that serve adult learners?
- Remain focused on adult learners. Conversations about postsecondary education often tend toward the high school-to-college pipeline. It was necessary to remain intentional in our focus on the adult learner population, and this report serves as an opportunity to focus specifically on this segment of students and prospective students.
- Highlight the experiences of adult learners and practitioners working with adult learners in their own words. Rather than drawing exclusively from secondary data sources, we looked to other research and conducted our own research in a way that prioritized the voices of adult learners and practitioners who work with adult learners.
- Bring together existing and new research in a way that allows OHE to better understand the current challenges and points towards possible solutions.

This report is organized as follows: First, we describe the steps we took over the course of this project and the methods we used. Second, we report findings from our listening sessions and discuss what conclusions we can draw from those findings. Third, we outline findings from a series of one-on-one meetings we conducted with a variety of practitioners across the course of the project. Finally, we suggest next steps that might be undertaken by OHE, postsecondary institutions, and other state organizations and agencies.

## Our approach

Using a variety of methods across this project allows us to leverage multiple kinds of knowledge in order to get a rich and comprehensive understanding of the landscape of adult learner engagement.

**Literature review:** To begin this study we conducted a literature review. We had two foci: First, we were interested in studies that allowed us to hear directly from students – including surveys, interviews, and focus groups with students and prospective students. We were interested in learning about the experiences of adult learners in their own words, particularly what factors influenced their decision to enroll and what challenges they faced. Second, we were interested in what creative solutions had been attempted across the country, but with special attention paid to programs and initiatives in Minnesota. We compiled the challenges and solutions that we saw repeatedly across studies (included in Figure 1) and used this information as a framework to develop the facilitation for the listening sessions.

**Listening sessions:** During spring 2021, Wilder held four listening sessions, each lasting two hours. A total of 48 practitioners and community members participated in the listening sessions. The sessions were designed to be conversational, an opportunity for participants to share their experiences and engage in conversation guided by Wilder facilitators. The four most common challenges that were identified in the literature review served as the framework, dividing the two hours into four discussion sessions, and dividing the full group of participants into smaller breakout groups. We collected over 20 hours of discussion recordings which were transcribed into 91 pages of qualitative data.

**Thematic analysis:** After completing four listening sessions, we used relational thematic analysis to identify major themes from transcriptions of the conversations that occurred during listening sessions. First, we reviewed the 57 transcription files and created a standardized codebook with which to code each transcription. This codebook included data source codes (the source of the transcription—from large-group discussion or from one of the four breakout discussions hosted during each listening session), perspective codes (codes pertaining to the perspectives of particular groups of people, such as students with disabilities), and thematic codes for each of the four breakout discussion topics (codes pertaining to the ideas and experiences shared by attendees when prompted by the topic in question). Then, using the qualitative analysis software program Atlas.ti, we systematically coded each interview.

Once all interviews were coded, we used the co-occurrence tool in Atlas.ti to identify relationships between codes, particularly between thematic codes. Then, we grouped codes together that exhibited high rates of co-occurrence as compared to the relative rate

of co-occurrence among all codes (“co-occurrence” refers to when two or more codes are used to code the same data). These code groups became our primary themes, which we discuss further in the report.

***One-on-one interviews:*** In order to understand the current landscape of adult learner engagement, workforce development, and postsecondary education, we conducted one-on-one or small group meetings with stakeholders from across the postsecondary ecosystem. These meetings were informal and conversational, as they were initially intended to be a source of background information to inform the other stages of the project. Very quickly, it became apparent that these meetings were a deep, rich cache of practitioner wisdom. We took notes during these meetings, which informed the creation of the listening session facilitation, as well as the conclusions and suggestions outlined later in the report. These meetings were also an opportunity for important relationship building. A number of individuals and groups that participated in these meetings became important advisors over the course of this project, and remain interested in partnering with OHE in future adult learner engagement efforts.

Across all phases of this project we used two key definitions. First, we define *adult learner* as any adult (18 or older) who has spent some time (a year or more, but typically longer) away from school and is enrolling or re-enrolling in postsecondary. This includes adults whose last educational experience was in high school, as well as those who completed some college or even a previous credential. This definition also includes adults who did not complete high school and are looking to complete some kind of adult basic education or a GED. Second, we define postsecondary education broadly to include all types of undergraduate postsecondary certificates or degrees. We also included adult basic education (ABE) in our conversations and analysis. Although ABE is not a part of postsecondary education, the Office of Higher Education was interested in this kind of education as it is an important part of the system of education that serves adults. Both of these definitions are intentionally broad, so we can learn about the widest possible array of adult learner experiences.

## Literature review

Adult learners are scholars on any educational path that involves spending time between high school and college completion not enrolled in postsecondary education. Increasing the number of adult learners involves addressing the unique barriers that this population faces. Stakeholders from all sectors have found innovative solutions to increase enrollment of adult learners into higher education. A short literature review was conducted to examine what barriers and solutions exist in the literature.

### Understanding the barriers

Deciding to pursue higher education involves costs, both in terms of financing and timing. How students will pay for a postsecondary credential is frequently a barrier. Understanding the true cost of a credential and the associated costs is frequently hard to navigate. When it comes to getting and receiving assistance, students have turned to college counselors and college websites. Adult learners may face counselors who are not well equipped to work with adult learners' unique situations, and college websites may be difficult to navigate or understand (Glancey, 2018). Furthermore, this population may need to consider current debts before taking on more debt to fund postsecondary education (Silliman & Schleifer, 2018).

Adult learners may have unique schedules and time commitments compared to younger students. They may have full-time jobs, families, and other caregiving responsibilities (Silliman & Schleifer, 2018). Transitioning from these full time commitments and ensuring that classes that fit around their schedules is another barrier (Hagelskamp et al., 2013). Another consideration prior to enrollment is the time costs associated with exploring credential and college options (MDC, 2018). Even with scheduling and financial logistics figured out, prospective students may still be unsure if their investment in postsecondary education will pay off (Foster et al., 2011).

Being out of school for a number of years, adult learners need more external support and affirmation to persist in their postsecondary program (Barnett, 2014). When prospective adult learners do not feel like they are accommodated in terms of outreach or support services, they may conclude that this route is not designed for them (Office for Fair Access, 2017).

## Creative solutions demonstrated across sectors

From postsecondary education institutions and government to local businesses and family members, adult learners interact with a number of sectors and stakeholders along the postsecondary education continuum. Stakeholders have a role in addressing the barriers adult learners face.

To address timing and scheduling, colleges and universities can offer flexibility in enrollment dates throughout the year, and offer a variety of course platforms, such as hybrid or online models (Glancey, 2018; Guilbaud & Tillberg-Webb, 2018). Institutions should place value on the insight and experiences that adult learners bring. For students that come in with prior learning or some college credits, institutions have worked with returning adult learners to accept prior learning as credits applicable to their program of study (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). This alleviates both the time and costs of taking non-essential courses.

Institutions can also ensure that students are aware of available financial aid, mental health services, and support resources (Horn & Lyle, 2021; Eyster et al., 2021). Thinking creatively beyond tuition assistance, other financial supports can include textbooks, transportation, child care, food, and housing. Institutions also play a role in reassuring that adult learners are making a worthwhile investment in their future. Showing prospective students that there is a clear pathway to a career eases the stress of uncertainty. Using real-world examples in the classroom, partnering with local companies to share job opportunities, and making the connections to an actual career once they graduate are ways to address this barrier (Barnett, 2014; Hanover Research, 2018).

Finally, state governments can bolster statewide postsecondary education attainment goal metrics and make them relevant for adult learners (Foster et al., 2011). Additionally, government has a role to play in ensuring that all populations have equitable access to postsecondary education. This can be done by addressing financial barriers to education, such as using state funds to help with student debt forgiveness, providing financial incentive to explore postsecondary credentials, and direct messaging to underrepresented populations (Person et al., 2019).



## Listening sessions

During April and May of 2021, Wilder held a series of listening sessions bringing together practitioners, educators, and advocates from across the state to discuss the barriers faced by adult learners in Minnesota and potential solutions. These stakeholders provided insight and expertise regarding the motivations and experiences of postsecondary adult learners. In each of the listening sessions, we prompted stakeholders to discuss four barriers to postsecondary enrollment and completion for adult learners:

1. The costs of postsecondary education can be too high for some individuals, particularly those with other financial commitments.
2. The time commitment associated with obtaining postsecondary credentials can be challenging to balance with other scheduling demands.
3. Adult learners may not see themselves reflected in existing narratives about postsecondary education.
4. Adult learners may not see postsecondary credentials as a wise investment of time and money.

We identified these four barriers through the literature review about common barriers to postsecondary enrollment and completion among adult learners in the United States. During listening sessions, we asked stakeholders to discuss two questions in regards to each barrier:

- What does this barrier look like in Minnesota? What does it look like for the communities that you are a part of, personally and professionally?
- What creative solutions exist across Minnesota for addressing or alleviating this barrier? What creative solutions should exist, if they don't exist currently?

## Findings

In total, we produced 57 sets of notes from these four listening sessions. Each of these sets of notes captured stakeholders' opinions and perceptions related to one of these four barriers. We analyzed these notes by creating a standard codebook for labeling and categorizing stakeholder opinions and perceptions by theme. We then used a relational thematic analysis approach to determine which codes were highly connected to others, and this resulted in seven primary themes.

It should be noted that some of these themes are presented as a strategy (for example, Theme 1), others are presented as a barrier (for example, Theme 2), and others still are presented as both a strategy and a barrier (for example, Theme 7). We chose to present the themes in these various ways—as a strategy, barrier, or both—in alignment with how stakeholders most commonly spoke of them. Additionally, some of these themes are commonly discussed as being unique to adult learners (for example, theme 2), while others are likely to be relevant to all postsecondary students (for example, theme 5). While we are focusing on the experiences of adult learners, we do not mean to suggest that these strategies or barriers do not exist for students coming directly from high school. The seven themes are:

1. Adult learners need help navigating how to pay for postsecondary education.
2. Adult learners are more likely to face increased barriers to enrollment and completion due to child care and family commitments (time and cost).
3. Access to multiple modes and schedules for completing postsecondary education, and support for learners pursuing non-traditional modes and schedules is important to the success of adult learners.
4. It may be useful for institutions and state agencies to bolster employer and industry partnerships to promote postsecondary education.
5. Adult learners are interested in “getting the most” out of postsecondary education, from a financial and career fulfillment standpoint.
6. Adult learners’ postsecondary goals are mismatched with traditional postsecondary structure and requirements.
7. Outreach, communication, and relationship building efforts should be pursued to address the postsecondary narrative mismatch for adult learners.

### **Theme 1. Help navigating how to pay for postsecondary education**

Overall, this theme was mentioned 62 times throughout the listening sessions. Stakeholders at the listening sessions spoke of this theme in two main ways. They said that adult postsecondary learners would benefit from more guidance regarding how to pay for postsecondary education. They also noted limitations of traditional approaches for paying for postsecondary education.

For example, stakeholders mentioned that some financial options are only available to full-time students, which is not possible for many adult learners. They also mentioned other eligibility requirements for receiving financial assistance, such as assistance that is only available if programs are completed “on time” (referring to two- or four-year postsecondary timelines). Other stakeholders mentioned that the required paperwork to

obtain financial assistance for postsecondary education (tax forms, bank statements, personal identification, and so on) is sometimes a barrier for adult learners as well.

Many stakeholders noted that completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) was a barrier for adult learners in Minnesota, particularly for low-income learners and immigrant and refugee learners. Numerous stakeholders also noted that adult learners saw the “sticker price” of postsecondary education and immediately thought that they couldn’t afford it because they were unaware of some of the financial aid options available to them, such as loans, grants, or scholarships.

*If you are a first generation person who goes to college, there's nowhere to get easy information about how to make it happen, where money should come from, what you need to do, how much your parents need to plan for. For folks in the BIPOC community, very often parents are just not a resource, for a number of reasons. They may have parents who are working two and three jobs and barely able to pay rent, and the process by which people do get financial aid is very complex, and it involves people being organized, having documentation, having access to printing or a computer. – Stakeholder*

*A lot of the people that I deal with in our community don't understand or have access to knowledge about FAFSA and the DREAM Act, which was where I come into play. We've had on-site education, all sorts of workshops, for these people in public housing. Often we get very low attendance. We try to impart this information to them and get it out, but we have a barrier of access to information first and foremost. Specifically, I could speak to the Somali, or rather, the Muslim community that we serve. They may know about these loans and they're very motivated and their families are behind them, but they can't obtain loans that require interest. They're in a kind of a position where they need to depend on other kinds of financial help, whether it's family or they work their way through or find Sharia loans and things like that, which are difficult to come by and more often given to small business people. So it's access to the information and then whether or not they can even use it [financial assistance]. – Stakeholder*

## **Theme 2. Child care and family commitments (time and cost)**

Overall, this theme was mentioned 74 times throughout the listening sessions. Stakeholders at listening sessions primarily spoke about the lack of affordable child care options as a barrier to adults enrolling in postsecondary education, but some stakeholders also mentioned other family commitments, like caring for parents or other family members. Other stakeholders mentioned the difficulty of adhering to postsecondary education schedules when raising children.

In particular, stakeholders noted that this was a prominent barrier for low-income adult learners and first generation adult learners. Many stakeholders noted that traditional postsecondary education schedules do not align with adult learners’ child care needs, and so these learners often have to choose between caring for their child and going to school. Numerous stakeholders also mentioned that, when faced with the decision, for example,

to pay for food for their family or pay for postsecondary education, most adult learners will choose to pay for their or their family's immediate need.

Lastly, many stakeholders mentioned that if no one in a potential learner's family has a postsecondary credential there is often less expectation that they will continue education after high school. As a result, there is less often planning for postsecondary education financially and otherwise, such as who will care for learners' parents or grandparents as they age if the adult learner is busy with postsecondary education. This is particularly true, according to stakeholders, for first generation learners who grew up in low-income households.

*Child care seems to be a really tough point for a lot of adult learners right now, finding it and affording it. There are child care grants available, but you have to be enrolled in six credits, at least, to tap into that. – Stakeholder*

*I think that higher education should look at building family-centered systems into our educational system—whether it's for a certificate program or a diploma program or another degree program. We should be thinking of higher education as having that wrap-around, family-centered, systemic approach to delivery. – Stakeholder*

*It's a really difficult decision to decide to go into debt to that extreme without some solid evidence that you're going to be able to pay it back. A lot of people from various cultural communities are not just supporting themselves. They may be supporting Grandmother. They may have a niece or a nephew in the home and so money is really, really, really important. – Stakeholder*

### **Theme 3. Multiple modes and schedules for completing postsecondary education, and support for learners pursuing non-traditional modes and schedules**

Overall, this theme was mentioned 137 times throughout the listening sessions. Stakeholders spoke about the need for multiple modes and schedules for completing postsecondary education, such as classes at night or on the weekend, or classes that can be completed online and at whatever pace works best for adult learners.

Many stakeholders mentioned that when these non-traditional modes and schedules are available, oftentimes learners do not have the same access to support as compared to students completing their postsecondary education in traditional ways. 'Traditional' and 'Non-traditional' can have a variety of meanings when discussing postsecondary education. When discussing modalities and schedules this phrasing often differentiates between full time (traditional) and part time (non-traditional), or in-person (traditional) and online courses (non-traditional). These stakeholders noted that adult learners often do not have access to many kinds of support, such as technical support for online learners, educational support because educators' standard office hours do not align with their work or class schedules, and peer support because they are not in a classroom with fellow students or because they are older or in a different "phase of life" as compared to fellow students.

Stakeholders mentioned the lack of multiple modes and schedules for completing postsecondary education as a barrier for learners with disabilities or those living with mental illness in particular. Most notably, stakeholders said that traditional learning modes and schedules are often not appropriate for learners with disabilities (because these learners often prefer slower-paced classes and courses), and that online options are likewise often not conducive for learners with cognitive or neurological impairments in particular. Similarly, some stakeholders noted that traditional schedules pose barriers for learners with mental health concerns or who identify as having a mental illness (because these learners sometimes cannot predict when mental health issues will arise and may need more flexibility with attendance and deadlines). Stakeholders said that multiple and flexible modes and schedules—as well as tailored support to accompany them—could help to alleviate this barrier.

*I have students who would not be able to go to college if they were going in person. Being online is actually what's enabling them. It's removing a barrier. It's enabling them to start going to college sooner than they could even think about it—especially my female students who are mothers raising children at home. They're juggling it. I mean, they've got kids doing homeschooling [during COVID-19], but they're in my night class. I teach the class at night from 5-8pm. Those two conditions—being at night and being online—are what's making it possible for them to do this. – Stakeholder*

*I'm up in greater Minnesota. We don't have universities and colleges in most of our towns. The nearest ones are hours away. The more that those larger university systems offer online classes, the better chance of people here doing postsecondary. With that said, we also have major broadband issues. We have Leech Lake, Red Lake, White Earth, Bois Forte, and Fond du Lac all up in greater Minnesota. In greater Minnesota, the broadband access is even worse out in Indian country. I know we have a broadband task force in Minnesota. I know that they're trying to fix stuff, but we're just not where we should be up in greater Minnesota to allow for steady streaming of classrooms and things like that. – Stakeholder*

*So many universities have that cost-benefit option when you are fully enrolled or over enrolled. You start taking 12 credits and you get a discount on your tuition. That's seen by the university as that push to get people to graduate in four years, which is also seen as a measure of a successful university—which is really counterproductive to adult learners and the challenges that they have with pressure on their time, whether it's kids or other jobs and all that stuff. Can we do away with that, or have some other kind of benefit that people who can't take 12 credits at a time also can access, instead of just providing that benefit to students who can focus solely on being a full-time student? – Stakeholder*

*We know that the majority of adult learners are typically part-time students. They're usually a full-time worker who's a part-time student. If you are a part-time student who's trying to earn a bachelor's degree, and you're taking an average of six or seven credit hours a semester, if you never drop a class, if you never fail a class, if you never change your program of study, if you never have anything go wrong, the best case scenario is you are on a 10-year path to your bachelor's degree. That's if everything goes right. I think almost everybody can look back at a 10-year stretch of your life and see—you moved, you changed your job, you got married, you got divorced, you had a child, you had a family member get sick. The longer that pathway stretches, the more opportunities there are for life to get in the way and to divert somebody out of higher education. – Stakeholder*

#### **Theme 4. Employer and industry partnerships to promote postsecondary education**

Overall, this theme was mentioned 81 times throughout the listening sessions. Many stakeholders talked about the disconnect between the goals of postsecondary education and the expectations that employers have of their employees. Because many adult learners pursue postsecondary education for job or career reasons, this disconnect poses critical barriers to enrollment and completion for adult learners.

Stakeholders suggested increased partnerships between postsecondary institutions and particular employers or multiple employers within a particular industry. Most often, stakeholders mentioned large employers (that employ thousands of workers, for instance) or industries wherein workers are in high demand (such as health care or manufacturing). These employers and industries were viewed by stakeholders as most likely to engage in partnerships with education institutions.

When talking about potential partnerships, stakeholders noted they could help alleviate the financial burden of postsecondary education if employers reimburse current or future employees for their postsecondary education costs. They also thought partnerships like this could help address the time commitment barrier (if employers allow their employees, for instance, to attend classes during the workday or partner with education institutions to offer classes at their workplaces).

*Being that I work at a technical college it is something that's not a barrier for us, especially when you are in a program that has a very concrete, immediate job related to it. It's much easier to see that [employment pathway] if you're going to go be a heavy-duty truck mechanic. That's the name of the program. There are jobs that have that same title. ... Plus you have our industry partners involved. They donate equipment to us. They offer internships. They hire our students before they've graduated. So that's not a barrier from the technical education point of view. – Stakeholder*

*What I do is meet with employers who want to set up dual training programs. What that means is someone who's already employed and working towards being a higher skilled employee, so they're going to school for a specific occupation—say a registered nurse—but right now they're like a CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant]. Their company is paying for their tuition while this person is employed and getting on-the-job training to work toward that profession. In the companies that are doing it, it's working very well. We have identified specific occupations that are in demand that companies are look for. That is addressing the tuition issue and also the issue of lack of money for rent or whatever, because they're continuing to be an employee. – Stakeholder*

## **Theme 5. “Getting the most” out of postsecondary education, from a financial and career fulfillment standpoint**

Overall, this theme was mentioned 103 times throughout the listening sessions. This theme refers to guiding adult learners throughout the entirety of their postsecondary education so that they are making choices that will increase the likelihood of full-time employment at a family-sustaining wage and career fulfillment once they complete their postsecondary education.

Stakeholders noted that the lack of guidance in this respect was a barrier particularly for first generation learners and learners that identify as BIPOC. In regards to first generation learners, stakeholders noted that these learners do not have someone in their family who has attained a postsecondary credential or degree, and as a result they don't have access to informal guidance regarding how to increase the likelihood of achieving employment and career fulfillment through completing postsecondary education.

In regards to BIPOC learners, stakeholders noted that BIPOC residents in Minnesota, on average, make less money than White residents in Minnesota, even if the BIPOC and White residents are in comparable positions and industries and have attained similar levels of education. As such, the employment and career guidance that will be most useful for adult BIPOC learners needs to be tailored to offset the impact of systemic employment inequities statewide as well as acknowledge and honor learners' racial and ethnic cultural identities.

*Just having a roadmap of why this is worth your time and money—having literal roadmaps. 'If you put in this kind of time and get this degree related to that career, here's what that might look like.' Of course you can't promise it, but communicate what a good range is for salaries—because people need to see the upward mobility to want to move forward. – Stakeholder*

*I think it's really important to speak to the individual about what college can bring them—and not speak to the general population. College has to be, 'Well, if you want to be a doctor, you have to do this. If you want to be a businessperson, you have to do that. If you want to have technical training, you have to do that. If you don't know what you want to do, it is a place where you can figure it out.' – Stakeholder*

*One of the things that happens is that for the African American community particularly, if you get a degree, you have a better chance of getting a job—but it's not necessarily guaranteed because of racism and the issues that you deal with in hiring. There are greater challenges to participating in the professional world, sometimes even more so as you get into these higher levels and go into higher places—because of the rarity of a person of color existing in those places. I myself am a software engineer. It's very rare to find another African American in software engineering almost anywhere. – Stakeholder*

*Disparity in the amount of income that a person of color with a degree is able to earn as opposed to a non-person of color without a degree—that's a barrier. That really does diminish the value and importance of a degree. In some communities, what a person has to do to get a degree really separates them from other people in their community. They might lose some of their connections in the community and, especially if you're coming from a group of folks where nobody else has gone to college, it takes an incredible amount of courage and effort to take that step outside of what everyone in your immediate surroundings has. – Stakeholder*

*There are so many higher education options that are not a four-year degree. If you look at labor market data, employers will say, 'I don't need somebody with a degree to this.' But that's not how they post their jobs. There's this myth out there [that a four-year degree is necessary], but the myth doesn't match the reality. I think we can do a much better job than we do at helping graduates, including liberal arts graduates, translate their learning for the workplace because it's clear that not everyone knows how to do that. – Stakeholder*

## **Theme 6. Adult learners' postsecondary goals are mismatched with traditional postsecondary structure and requirements**

Overall, this theme was mentioned 55 times throughout the listening sessions. This theme refers to the traditional structure and requirements for postsecondary education (and the structure and requirements for a four-year degree in particular), and how they are often mismatched in relation to the goals of adult learners. In this context, participants use of 'traditional' often referred to aspects of timing and course requirements, often highlighting general education credits, full time enrollment, and on-time credential completion. Stakeholders critiqued general education requirements not directed related to the credential sought and not directly related to the career goals of adult learners. They noted that general education requirements like these are a barrier for adult learners to enroll and complete postsecondary courses or programs because they are not seen as useful or worthwhile in regards to adult learners' education and career goals.

*I pay attention to the way math classes can add to people's debt, the way math classes specifically are a barrier. They tend to be a big barrier—but not always, and it so much depends on the teacher or the exact program. Because people don't do well in the math class, they'll drop out, or get an F or incomplete and then they have to pay for the class again. It's a driver of debt and a driver of slow time to completion. – Stakeholder*



*Part of this is the trauma that many students experience when they come to college. They've had a B average, trying their best at high school. Then they place into three developmental courses that aren't going to count toward college graduation. I've seen many students after that first semester, particularly if they're not completely successful at the developmental work, they're gone. I think that's a huge barrier. – Stakeholder*

*I think a lot of adult learners have very high personal expectations. The assumption is, if I'm going to go back to school, I've got to do it right if I'm going to do it all. How am I going to be able to concentrate and do all of the work that I think it's going to take? ... You need to tell them that it's okay to get a C. It's okay to get a B. This isn't about your perfection. A lot of times, adult learners can put pressure on themselves, thinking that things have to be perfect. And it's like, 'You know what? It needs to be acceptable. It needs to be good.' It's that balance. – Stakeholder*

### **Theme 7. Outreach, communication, and relationship building to address the postsecondary narrative mismatch for adult learners**

Overall, this theme was mentioned 44 times throughout the listening sessions. Stakeholders suggested that postsecondary institutions pursue targeted outreach, communication, and relationship building because many potential adult learners do not see themselves reflected in prevailing narratives surrounding postsecondary education. In particular, stakeholders noted that this was a barrier for BIPOC adult learners. Further, they said that doing targeted outreach, communication, and relationship building with BIPOC communities is worthwhile, but that often when BIPOC learners enroll in postsecondary education, they find themselves in a course or program in which their racial and ethnic cultural identities are not acknowledged, understood, or affirmed.

*I think that's really a struggle even when you see the pamphlets, the brochures, it's always pictures of young people. I think that makes it hard for people to see themselves in a university or in a college. If I don't see somebody that looks like me, I'm not going to go. Even when it's an older person, it's always like a white older person and so it's like, 'Well, where's the Latino student that's older—African American student, Asian American student?' I think that also needs to be reflected so that people can see themselves going to a place that's for them. – Stakeholder*

*One of the things that really opened my eyes was partnering with an Indigenous community on getting some more people enrolled in higher education within their community. One of the things they said was that even though the college campus was just a few miles away from their community, they did not feel comfortable going there because they would get side-glances, hear racial microaggressions, that sort of thing. Just the racism that they would experience either going into the town or to the campus was not something they wanted to experience. They didn't see themselves as being welcomed on the campus. – Stakeholder*

*Most colleges and universities in Minnesota have pretty ample admission staff. They often work a little too much like salespersons, I think. I can't imagine that there couldn't be a position that's dedicated to recruiting older students, and the person that's doing that work could have experienced college like that [as an older student]. If you compare the likelihood of graduation by demographics, older students do really well and in some cases better than students right out of high school for a lot of reasons. There's a whole lot of faculty out there who would prefer to have a mature student because they're going to know that if the homework's due Friday, it's due Friday—and not come in with all these stories about this and that [for why they didn't finish the homework]. I don't think that the average 27-, 28-, 30-year-old who is thinking of going to college does things like that. – Stakeholder*

## One-on-one meetings with stakeholders

At the outset of the project, Wilder Research began conducting one-on-one meetings with individuals and organizations from across the postsecondary education ecosystem. These meetings allowed us to become familiar with the landscape of organizations who currently engage with adult learners and get the word out about listening sessions. These meetings quickly became an invaluable source of information, providing us with an in-depth understanding of the efforts of these organizations, the challenges they faced, and potential solutions. We continued these meetings after the listening sessions concluded, using the meetings as an opportunity to share what we had learned from the listening sessions and get feedback that was informed by deep practitioner wisdom. Across these meetings, a number of insights came up repeatedly, which can inform OHE's next steps in their effort to expand adult learner engagement.

Conversations about the cost of college currently happen in a way that may be exacerbating 'sticker shock.' 'Sticker shock' used here refers to an individual's negative reaction when considering the full cost of tuition and fees across all years of enrollment in one aggregated sum. Individuals commonly pay tuition and fees each semester over the course of their enrollment, or monthly in the years following. As such, it might be beneficial to discuss the cost of college using semester or monthly figures, similar to the way we discuss paying for cars, homes, or other large purchases.

Many practitioners identified the need for more and better resources about how to pay for college, particularly more info about how to make decisions about taking on and paying off debt. Additionally a need was identified for more streamlined ways for students and prospective students to get information about and access to tuition assistance, grants, scholarships, and low interest or subsidized loans. This exists to a certain extent via the FAFSA, however practitioners suggested an expansion of this current system.

We spoke with a number of individuals who discussed the need for a whole student and a whole community approach to postsecondary education. The goal here is to identify needs that exist for a student outside of their academic career and work to align supports to meet those varied needs. This will be of particular relevance with adult learners who have increased commitments outside of college. We spoke with an administrator at a college campus located in a rural area, who described the way in which the campus transitioned during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the stay-at-home orders began campus administrators and staff worked with students to make sure they had the necessary technology and internet access. Given the rural location of this campus, internet access was not available for many students. Once they were able, they transitioned different spaces throughout the campus to accommodate students' changing needs during this time, including study spaces that accommodated students' children were open during hours that accommodated busy

lives and work schedules. Throughout the pandemic, efforts were made to avoid laying off campus employees, instead changing their roles and assignments to accommodate the changing conditions. These efforts were not unique to this campus, as college campuses around the country innovated in order to serve their students and community. Such innovation can inform efforts to serve adult learners, who often juggle changing schedules and circumstances.

Practitioners suggested that building relationships should be a key component of efforts to increase enrollment and completion rates. Many stakeholders described the ways they saw their students, colleagues, and community members share information, and suggested person-to-person information sharing can be a powerful way to reach prospective students. Mass marketing may spark interest, as we see with commercials and billboards. This is a crucial first step towards enrollment, but participants suggested that students make decisions based on the information and advice they receive from the people in their social networks – friend groups, families, workplaces, community groups, etc. Commercials, billboards, and online information hubs would be made all the more useful if these strategies were coupled with relationship building efforts.

Relationship building is not only key to enrollment, but may also benefit the community of educators, administrators, and advocates who work with adult learners. Many of the stakeholders we spoke with during one-on-one meetings and the listening sessions mentioned that professional networks of people who work specifically with adult learners are not common, but could be beneficial. The information sharing among peer networks that help prospective students become students can benefit practitioners who are developing new programs and practices to serve more diverse groups of students in new ways.

Finally, efforts and initiatives designed to engage adult learners need to maintain their focus on adult learners. Across this project, conversations often tended towards the high school to college transition. It required a concerted effort to keep conversations focused on adult learners. The goals and circumstances of adult learners can vary from students coming directly from high school, and thus can get lost when efforts and conversations shift focus to younger populations of students.

## Conclusions and next steps

Overall, stakeholders who took part in the listening sessions and one-on-one meetings offered many insights about barriers to enrollment for adult learners, as well as many ideas for addressing these barriers. Numerous stakeholders mentioned that relationship-based, person-centered supports at every step of an adult learner’s postsecondary education could help address many of the barriers noted in this report. Figure 1 outlines the full set of barriers and solutions identified across this project, categorized into salient themes.

Most often, suggestions for addressing barriers included a counselor getting to know prospective or current adult learners and making a plan for their postsecondary education based on their current realities (financial considerations, family situation, and so on) and their career and financial goals. As such, Wilder Research offers the following recommendations for OHE to consider moving forward.

### **Promote relationship-based, person-centered supports for adult learners at every step of their postsecondary education.**

<p>For adults who are <b>interested in or considering enrolling</b> in postsecondary education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer personalized FAFSA guidance and share other options for paying for postsecondary education. When such guidance exists, publicize this resource and make sure it is broadly accessible.</li> <li>• Guide individuals’ reflections on their career and financial goals, to connect them with the kind of postsecondary education that will best position them to meet these goals.</li> <li>• Identify opportunities to pursue postsecondary education that is supported by their current employer, or otherwise supported by employers within their desired industry.</li> <li>• Modify the way we discuss paying for college to avoid sticker shock. Provide information to prospective students about the way in which they can expect to repay loans, to ensure safe borrowing and realistic expectations about the size of monthly payments.</li> </ul>	<p>For adults who are <b>currently enrolled</b> in postsecondary education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer flexible scheduling options, and various course modes to accommodate a multitude of circumstances.</li> <li>• Proactively provide technical, educational, and peer support for adult learners taking classes in the evenings or on weekends, doing coursework online, or completing classes at a non-traditional pace.</li> <li>• Check in with adult learners regularly during their postsecondary education to make sure their education is proceeding as planned and remains aligned with their career goals.</li> <li>• Connect adult learners with employers in their desired field, preferably employers who offer internships or other opportunities to gain experience while still a student</li> </ul>	<p>For adults who are <b>nearing the end of their postsecondary education</b> or have already completed their program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a detailed career attainment plan with adult learners before they finish their postsecondary education.</li> <li>• Connect adult learners with employers in their desired field, preferably employers who offer tuition reimbursement for new employees.</li> <li>• After program completion, continue checking in and providing advice regarding career and financial goals.</li> <li>• Partner with employers in a variety of industries so that employers are connected with potential employees as adult learners are finishing their postsecondary education.</li> </ul>
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In addition to engaging students, this project highlighted the usefulness of a network of practitioners who work with adult learners either directly or indirectly via advocacy or the creation of institution or state level policy. This network would serve as an opportunity to share information, build relationships, or provide feedback to the state legislature and state agencies about policies and practices. There are a variety of ways OHE might facilitate the creation of such a network: a champion’s council, a conference or meeting series, or other opportunities to engage virtually or in person. Throughout our one-on-one and small group meetings, we identified areas of the postsecondary education ecosystem that could provide useful insight to OHE as they continue engaging with adult learners.

- Students
- Mental health advocacy organizations
- Tribal colleges
- Representatives from cultural communities
- Representatives from the business community
- Funders
- Representatives from greater Minnesota
- State agencies and representatives from the state college and university system

This should not be considered an exhaustive list. As we have learned over the course of this project, inclusivity when developing policies, practices, and programs to support adult learners has an important positive impact on experiences and outcomes, for individuals and our state as a whole.

# ADULT LEARNER ENGAGEMENT: BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS



BARRIERS	SOLUTIONS	
<p><b>Cost</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Basic needs insecurity (housing, food, child care, etc.)</li> <li>— Taking on more debt</li> <li>— Transaction costs (exploration, decision making)</li> <li>— Alignment of resources</li> <li>— Cost of higher education</li> </ul>	<p><b>Help navigating how to pay for college</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Free community college</li> <li>— Financial aid</li> <li>— Free access to textbooks</li> <li>— Access to financial products</li> <li>— Financial coaching</li> <li>— Statewide Bridge program</li> <li>— State funds to help with loan forgiveness</li> <li>— First free class</li> <li>— Emergency aid</li> <li>— Affordable tuition</li> <li>— Small debt forgiveness</li> <li>— Micro grants (&lt;\$500)</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Times demands</b></p> <p>Unaware of student services</p> <p>Lack of courses with time/length/platform accommodations</p> <p>Transportation</p> <p>Need additional motivation and validation</p> <p>Keeping up academically</p> <p>Balancing responsibilities</p> <p>Staying motivated</p> <p>Families/caregiver responsibilities</p> <p>Commute to classes</p>	<p><b>Child care and family commitments</b></p> <p>Transportation card</p> <p>Enhanced supportive services</p> <p>Social supportive services (housing, food, childcare, etc.)</p>	<p><b>Multiple Modes and scheduling</b></p> <p>Flexible delivery methods</p> <p>Adult student tailored courses and delivery methods</p> <p>Convenient class scheduling</p> <p>Standardize course look and feel</p> <p>Incorporate active learning strategies in classroom</p> <p>Resource links in course pages</p> <p>Social integration model in the classroom</p> <p>Designated distance learning center</p> <p>Easy to navigate website</p> <p>Asynchronous delivery model</p> <p>Completion colleges sponsored by the state</p>





BARRIERS	SOLUTIONS	
<p><b>Existing narratives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior learning and knowledge is not acknowledged</li> <li>Not feeling part of the target outreach audience</li> <li>Lack of tech “know-how”</li> <li>Academic integration after pause</li> <li>Unwelcoming feeling at New Student orientation</li> <li>Lack of social capital</li> <li>Less interest in soft skills</li> <li>Social integration with younger students</li> </ul>	<p><b>Outreach communication and relationship building to address mismatch of postsecondary narrative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outreach campaign to re-engage adult learners</li> <li>Build partnerships in communities of color</li> <li>Encourage student identity</li> <li>Advertising should address local population</li> <li>Alignment of state longitudinal data to identify eligible adult learner students</li> <li>Set clear, measurable, relevant equity goals</li> <li>Set statewide education attainment goals</li> </ul>	<p><b>The goals of adult learners don’t align with those of traditional postsecondary structure and requirements</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maximize transfer credits</li> <li>Address assessment policies</li> <li>Develop other pathways to post secondary</li> <li>Grand credit for prior learning (past informal education)</li> <li>Award credit for previous work (past formal education)</li> <li>Contextualize basic skills with career skill</li> <li>Contextualization of subject materials</li> </ul>
<p><b>Wise financial investment?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Graduate on time?</li> <li>Inadequate academic + career support</li> <li>Unclear pathway to degree completion</li> <li>Knowledge Skills Assets (KSA) gap of graduates</li> <li>Learning real world skills?</li> <li>Lack of college-employer partnerships</li> <li>Fear of not making progress towards career goals</li> <li>Unclear pathway to degree completion</li> </ul>	<p><b>Getting the most out of college</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show clear pathways to graduation</li> <li>Proactive advising</li> <li>Advising for degree completion</li> <li>Transition support</li> <li>Differentiated advising</li> <li>Understand academic purpose</li> <li>Help students clarify educational commitment goals</li> <li>Face to face support resources</li> </ul>	<p><b>Employer and industry partners</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connect to careers</li> <li>Job placement</li> <li>Increase employer engagement</li> <li>Form employer advisory committees</li> <li>Ask employers for feedback/input on curriculum development</li> <li>Colocation of college and employer facilities</li> <li>Monetary and in-kind contributions from employers</li> <li>Professional development for college faculty and staff</li> <li>Employer guest teaching</li> <li>Work-based learning opportunities</li> <li>Direct hiring of program graduates</li> <li>Employer/industry fiscal and policy advocacy</li> </ul>



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