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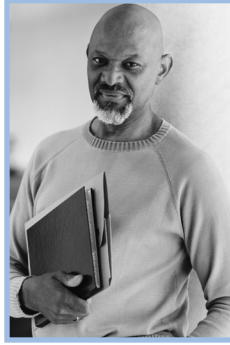
*Adults' Success  
in College  
is Key to  
America's  
Future*

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March 2007

# Acknowledgments

The authors of this report are grateful for the support of Lumina Foundation for Education. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation, its officers or employees.



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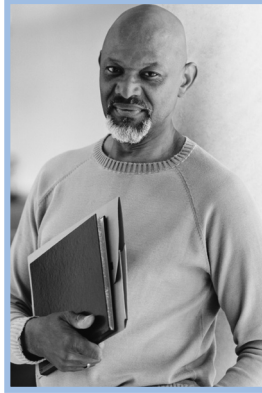
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# Introduction

**I**n the United States, postsecondary education has long driven individual social mobility and collective economic prosperity. Nonetheless, the nation's labor force includes 54 million adults who lack a college degree; of those, nearly 34 million have no college experience at all. In the 21st century, these numbers cannot sustain us. Increasing global economic competition and the rapid pace of technological change are revolutionizing the skills and educational qualifications necessary to individual job success and national economic well-being. If current trends hold, the United States will continue to trail global competitors on a number of key measures of educational achievement. Our nation is at a crossroads. With a committed and informed approach, we can help realize the vast educational potential of America's adult learners and thus substantially benefit individuals, families, communities and the national economy. If we

ignore the problem, we will further limit our adult citizens and erode the vitality of our essential institutions.

Broad access to higher education has long been a hallmark of the American postsecondary system. Despite its remarkable successes, the U.S. postsecondary system has often fallen short of its ideals in

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terms of access for various demographic groups. For much of our history, the nation's robust industrial economy has allowed many Americans to earn a comfortable living without having earned a baccalaureate degree. Those days are all but gone. The knowledge economy and global industrial production have necessitated postsecondary

education — individually and nationally. Upgrading our skills and credentials throughout the workforce is urgent.

Providing 54 million working adults with baccalaureate degrees is no small task for individuals, institutions or policymakers. In fact, it

represents a dramatic, global shift in our national commitment to a college-educated citizenry. Our task is to transform not only educational institutions, their students and communities, but also the state and national policies that shape them. As this transformation promotes baccalaureate degree attainment for nontraditional students, it must also preserve the strengths of existing programs that do not culminate in the four-year degree.

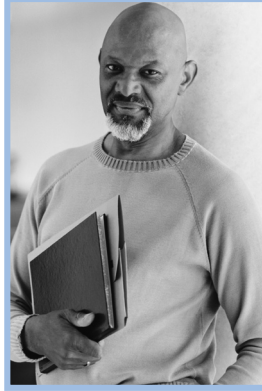
To better understand how the nation can meet this challenge, Lumina Foundation for Education has funded a series of linked, exploratory research efforts called the Emerging Pathways project. The project, directed by researchers in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia and their affiliates, has identified several areas of concern and points to a number of promising avenues for change. Among its findings are the following:

- We must seek to develop the untapped potential of the 54 million working adults who have not completed a four-year degree. Their success is essential to themselves, their families and communities, and to the health and security of the nation.
- Adult learners must be recognized as a diverse and complex set of individuals with widely divergent aspirations, levels of preparation and degrees of risk.
- Adult learners' varying life circumstances require postsecondary policymakers, institutional leaders and other stakeholders

to provide convenient and affordable access, create flexible subsidies and develop innovative planning tools to increase student success.

- Adult students increasingly choose entrepreneurial postsecondary institutions and programs, including continuing education, contract education, satellite and online programs and for-profit institutions.
- Credit for course completion remains a key component of baccalaureate attainment and other forms of credentialing. Institutions must better understand and document adult learners' patterns of credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing course enrollment.
- Pre-baccalaureate programs should increasingly be linked to credit attainment. The "hidden college" of non-credit, revenue-generating courses should also become a pathway to credit-bearing certificates and credentialing.
- State attention and resources are devoted increasingly to P-16 educational reform programs, yet these programs do not adequately serve adult learners. This oversight must be corrected. Policymakers must recognize adult students' diverse goals and differing educational pathways.

For more detailed information on these findings, and for background and supplementary material on all of the research efforts that constitute the Emerging Pathways project, visit: <http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/emergingpathways>.



# Understanding adult learners

**F**or all of their individual and collective importance to American life, adult learners have typically been treated as an afterthought in higher education. The irony is that a substantial portion of these students are at great risk of failing to complete courses and degrees. They typically struggle to balance work and family commitments. They often lack resources and generally must adapt to a system designed to serve younger, full-time students. Moreover, adults also are often enrolled in programs poorly documented by traditional postsecondary data-collection systems. Whether enrolled in community colleges or four-year institutions, adults often follow nontraditional pathways, such as continuing-education and extension programs, contract education arrangements and programs offered online, at satellite campuses, or at for-profit colleges.

Our research suggests that many adult learners face a daunting set of postsecondary challenges.

Many adults need to secure jobs quickly and cannot afford long-term enrollment. Thus they often choose training programs that cannot offer the long-term security of an associate's or bachelor's degree. The changing needs of the labor market may mean that adult learners with limited training need to return again and again for more training.

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**Millions of adult students are seeking degrees in a system built largely for — and around — traditional students.**  
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Policymakers have tried to address adult learners' multiple challenges while securing a skilled, steady labor force. Nonetheless, the problem is complex. Increasing adult attainment of the baccalaureate

degree will produce the highest individual and social returns; however, this goal clashes with the structures in place to support it. Millions of adult students are seeking degrees in a system built largely for — and around — traditional students. We must recognize this paradox if we hope to fully educate our workforce.

A key goal of the Emerging Pathways project is to clarify for institutional leaders, policymakers

and various postsecondary stakeholders the present and future of adult postsecondary education. To that end, our research explored a number of settings and used a variety of methods. Our findings point to four important lessons, each of which should inform efforts to improve postsecondary education for adult learners. Those lessons, briefly stated, are the following:

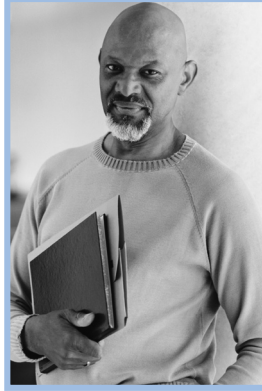
1. **There is no “typical” adult learner.** Institutional leaders and policymakers should view “the adult learner” as a diverse set of individuals with distinctive demographics, social locations, aspirations and levels of preparation.
2. **A key area of adult learning is poorly understood.** A vast world of site-based and online, short-term, non-credit classes now serves millions of learners. Because it is often excluded from state resource-allocation models, this “hidden college” is little understood by policymakers. Yet, because of the demands of the emerging knowledge economy, this arena is critical to the nation’s future.
3. **The well-worn path will not work for most adult learners.** Many adult students choose nontraditional paths to postsecondary education because they work, are responsible for dependents, and can sometimes obtain tuition assistance from an employer if they enroll in a

part-time program. These pathways often offer fewer resources per student than do traditional resident and commuter campuses. Their range of curricular options is distinctly different. Adult learners generally seek convenient access and a high degree of certainty in choosing a program. As a result, they may select private or for-profit institutions that offer organized programs specifically designed to serve them. Yet these institutions cannot necessarily meet the needs of a wide range of adult learners or the public goals for adult higher education. A variety of extenuating factors, including student characteristics; access to information; and the nature of local, state and national subsidies shape the probability of success for adult learners.

4. **To find the right path, adult learners need a guide.** Few factors influence adult learners’ success more than student/institutional planning and counseling. Mapping the student’s path to postsecondary success is crucial.

All of these factors require supportive state and national policies that address adult students’ preparation, access, retention and success. In spite of their role in achieving state and national social and economic goals, adult learners continue to need greater support from the policy community to ensure access to and success in postsecondary education.





# A new view of adult learners

**D**rawing on the Emerging Pathways project's comprehensive national surveys of more than 700 institutions, 1,500 students and a longitudinal case study based on 180 interviews at community colleges in nine states, researcher John S. Levin at the University of California, Riverside has developed a continuum of adult and nontraditional learner characteristics. This continuum enables institutional leaders, mentors and others to identify the degree to which a given adult learner is at risk of failure in the postsecondary environment (Figure 1, Page 6). One end of the continuum features adult students whose risk of failure is minimal — that is, they are well equipped with information, skills and resources. At the other end are high-risk students who lack the skills and resources necessary to succeed. Understanding this continuum allows us to see the diversity of adult student needs more clearly.

**Despite the stiff challenges they face, many students at risk have strong and enduring aspirations.**

Levin's research stratifies student risk factors. Low-risk adult students generally exhibit one characteristic that may limit postsecondary success, such as being a first-generation college student. Adult students at moderate risk exhibit two or three characteristics, such as first-generation status, part-time enrollment or lower socioeconomic standing. A student at high risk of failure exhibits many

characteristics in addition to the aforementioned — for example, single parenthood or employment of more than 20 hours a week. Adult learners in Levin's highest-risk category, ultra-high-risk students, exist on the periphery of higher education. With limited governmental and

institutional support, they drop in and out of programs, sometimes earning so few credits that they are nearly invisible. Many are invisible as well because they are not acknowledged in formal accounting of student enrollments.

Despite the stiff challenges they face, many students at risk have strong and enduring

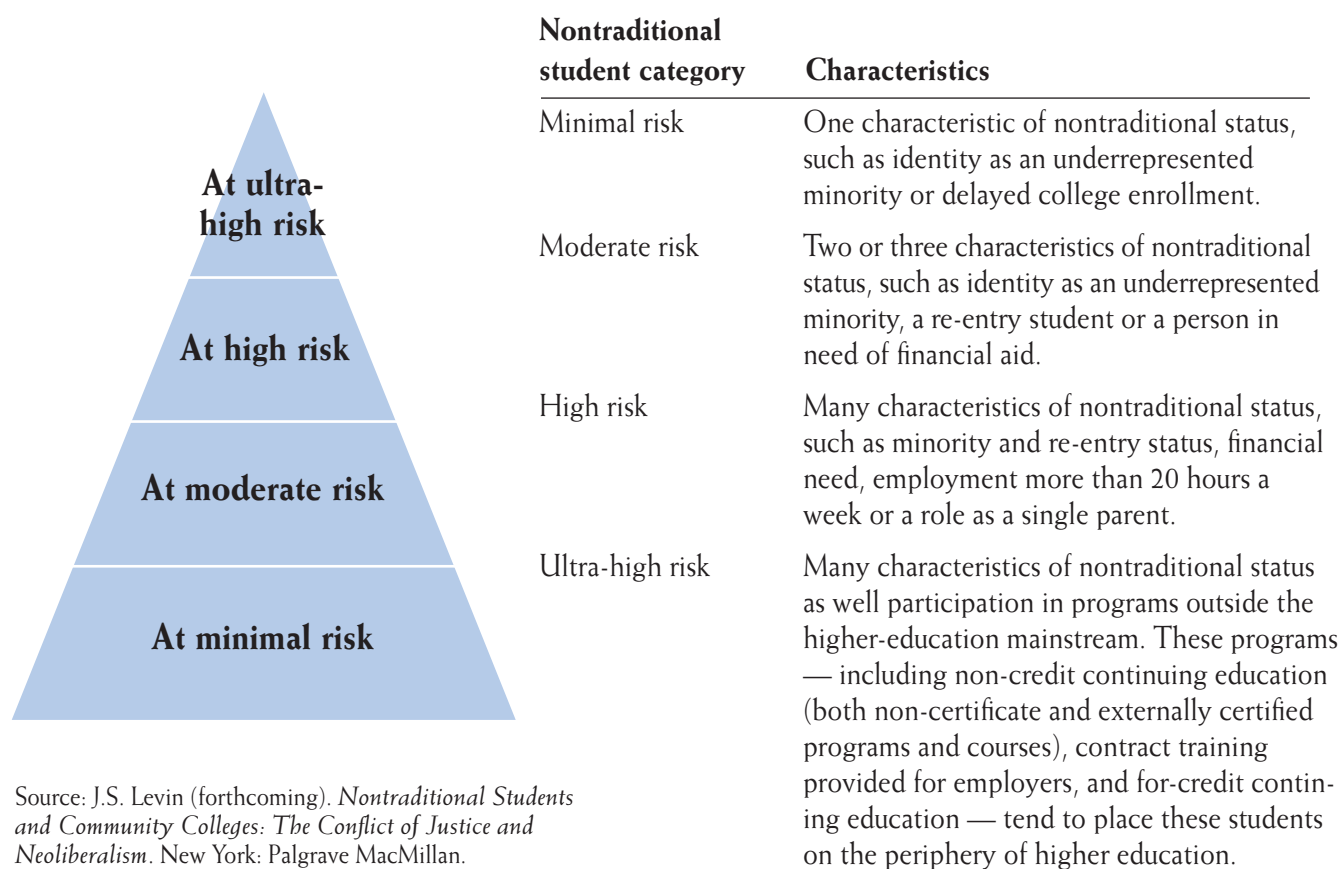
aspirations for themselves, their families and their communities. As one high-risk adult community college student explained in an interview,

“My daughter turned 4 yesterday. I went ahead and put her in Head Start. I feel like if they see me trying to do better for myself, then it’ll give them the gumption to try to do everything. Hopefully they’ll go to college after high school and not be like me and just get out and work. They’re excited about me being in school. But there are some days that they just want me to be home with them. I don’t want them to have to suffer for me doing what I want to do. My 6-year-old said,

‘I’m proud of my momma.’ I just cried all to pieces. Some days I have thought about quitting and going to work. Just because money is tight, things get hard, really hard. I’ve got a family to raise. Every time I look at my girls — that’s why I’m here — for me and for them.”

Positive attitudes such as this one motivate students to perform well. However, sometimes that motivation is not well placed in programs that do not best serve the student. High-risk adult learners face another hurdle: Many tend to enroll in nontraditional programs, such as non-credit-bearing course sequences and contract education training. Such programs can compromise advanced certification or transfer to baccalaureate degree

**Figure 1: Adult learner typology**



programs. According to Levin, of the 6.2 million students in credit programs in community colleges, 3.5 million are estimated to be at moderate or high risk. This figure does not include the estimated 5 million community college students not registered in credit-bearing programs, a group that likely contains many students who have not yet earned the baccalaureate degree.

The evidence gathered in the Emerging Pathways project suggests that although institutions are becoming sensitive to the challenges adult learners face, institutional actions and strategies are neither generally systematic nor empirically based. Nor do they sufficiently account for the diverse identities, characteristics and needs of the adult learner population. Institutions that serve the most disadvantaged populations in higher education cannot improve student experiences, persistence and success unless they understand the complex personal and academic obligations that characterize these populations. Levin's research shows that multiple forces encourage most lower-income students to enroll in community colleges. These forces include demographic shifts, rising tuition and increasingly stringent admissions requirements at four-year institutions.

Adult learners in the highest risk categories demonstrate four primary categories of need: first, they need guides and mentors; second, they need financial aid, including tuition remission, grants

and paid employment; third, they need a peer community; and fourth, they need a guided and specific academic plan. These needs appear to differentiate these students from students at lower risk. However, research must continue to articulate the needs of at-risk adult learners and their daily experiences in college.

## What institutions can do

Analyses of the community college survey and interview data indicate that at-risk adult learners in community colleges are most successful when at least one of the following applies:

1) **Help on the ground.** Students enroll in specific programs that offer work-study, tutoring, peer networks or learning communities, and financial aid that includes tuition remission. These programs

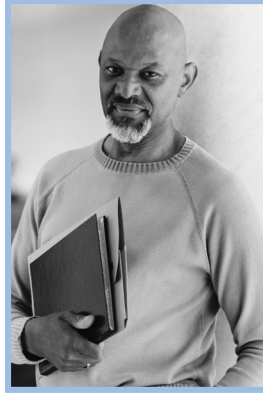
depend on state and institutional leaders to develop funding and policies in support of such programs.

2) **Help from above.** Students can rely on college administrators, counselors and faculty as well as on committed members of the policy community who champion the cause of adult students. As essential as these "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1980) are, they point to the need for more systemic and coherent support systems.

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# The National Survey of Students in Continuing Education

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**T**he findings from the National Survey of Students in Continuing Education powerfully remind us that contexts matter. Two-year and four-year continuing-education programs are two of the central avenues for adult postsecondary study. Because they offer a wide range of certificate and training credentials, continuing-education programs have long been recognized for providing essential labor market skills. However, they are less often understood as pathways to further levels of postsecondary attainment.

National data sets have failed to capture the significance of continuing education. They have not been detailed extensively in policy literature or academic research. To address this oversight, Emerging Pathways project members led by University of Virginia educational researcher Bruce M. Gansneder constructed two comprehensive national surveys — one focused on students and

one on institutions — as part of the data-collection process.<sup>1</sup>

## Students and institutions

The 700-plus surveys completed by institutions and the 1,500 surveys completed by adult learners in two- and four-year colleges and universities confirmed some previous assumptions but contradicted others. As expected, affordability and convenience to home and work influence adult learners' choice of programs. Ironically, although many postsecondary programs for adults focus on workforce training, the majority reported that acquiring knowledge is a higher priority than is enhancing employability, while half are seeking baccalaureate attainment. The survey findings also suggest areas in which postsecondary programs could better serve adult learners. For example, survey participants reported that childcare services, though rarely available, would be extremely

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<sup>1</sup> The technical reports from these national surveys, including data tables, are available at: <http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/emergingpathways>.

helpful. Furthermore, convenient delivery systems such as online learning programs were often described as underdeveloped.

## Demographics

The adult learners in both two-year and four-year continuing-education programs were considerably older than traditional students. Students in the smallest institutions were the oldest on average (40.7 years), whereas students in the largest institutions were younger (37.9 years). Students who attended institutions of between 501 and 10,000 students were the youngest (mean age ranged from 30.7 years to 31.3 years). An important finding from these surveys is that although they are older than the traditional-aged students, adult learners are nonetheless in the early stages of their working lives. In an era in which most individuals intend to work beyond the age of 65, these adults were repositioning themselves to use their postsecondary training in the labor market for many years.

The majority of students identified themselves as white or Caucasian (69.1 percent). A sizable proportion of students identified themselves as African-American (22.7 percent). Other ethnicities included Hispanic (3.3 percent), "other" (2.6 percent) and Asian or Pacific Islander (2.4 percent). A quarter of the responding institutions reported enrollments comprising more than 45 percent first-generation college students.

## Information

Information is key to postsecondary success for any student — adult or traditional. However, adult learners often begin with an information deficit. A significant majority of continuing-education students at the institutions surveyed had not obtained certificates or degrees through

a continuing-education program. While many factors contribute to the information deficit, most institutions surveyed did not provide academic services beyond regular office hours, nor did they offer them online.

## Curriculum and pedagogy

Reflecting the strong labor market orientation of continuing education programs, the three top fields of study in credit-based programs were the following: 1) management, business and marketing; 2) arts, humanities and social sciences; and 3) education. The leading fields of study for non-credit-bearing courses were the following: 1) computer and information technologies; 2) management, business and marketing; and 3) arts, humanities and social sciences. The options for adult learners in continuing-education programs were relatively limited; on average, just over a third of the majors offered elsewhere in the institution were also available through continuing education.

## Financing emerging pathways

Continuing-education programs are tuition-driven. Tuition and fees constitute 60 percent of revenue; funds from contract education programs provide another quarter. Almost two-thirds of the institutions reported that revenue exceeded costs in their continuing-education programs.

Student responses concerning financial aid were especially revealing. Only about a third of adult students reported receiving student loans, and less than a third received federal or state grants or private scholarships. Nearly a third also reported that they were unaware of financial aid available to them. Clearly, with 60 percent of adult learners in single-income households, issues involving educational financing often impede access to postsecondary education.

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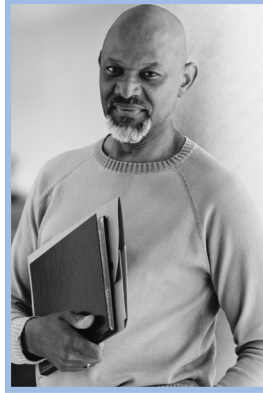
## What institutions can do

The National Survey emphasizes the importance of information. All institutions can assist their adult learners by making information more readily available. The Emerging Pathways findings strongly suggest that adult learner success is related to communication between current or potential students and their institutions. When adult student priorities and choices align with institutional offerings and resources, success is more likely. The following information interventions bolster that success:

- Institutions should convey information about all forms of financial aid through

conveniently accessible workshops, peer mentoring and online presentations.

- Institutions should promote credit attainment for long-term credentialing and degree attainment. Although non-credit-bearing training is useful, credit attainment that leads to degree completion and higher earnings offers maximal success and can help forge stronger families and communities.
- Institutions should give adult learners easy access to information about student services.



## Adult learner success and four-year institutions

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**M**any adults begin their postsecondary educations in four-year institutions. Others undertake community college coursework or earn associate's degrees in anticipation of transferring to four-year institutions. To determine the characteristics of academic programs at four-year institutions that most influence adult learner success, we conducted a series of 80 interviews at 20 four-year institutions and collected nearly 500 institutional and more than 900 student surveys at four-year institutions. The findings point to the four major actions that institutions can take to enhance adult learning and success:

- Develop pre-baccalaureate, career-related certificate programs that incorporate academic credit that can be counted toward a degree.

- Provide part-time degree programs.
- Create year-round, accelerated and convenient programming.
- Facilitate degree mapping.

Because many adults attend community college before enrolling at a four-year institution, successful

transfer from two-year to four-year institutions is crucial. Our data suggest that these pre-baccalaureate programs should offer both job training and credit-bearing courses that contribute to requirements for associate's or baccalaureate

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**Rarely are adult learners' higher education enrollments continuous.**

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degrees. Rarely are adult learners' higher education enrollments continuous; such students may enroll in courses to meet short-term goals (such as specific labor market skill development), withdraw for a period of time, and then re-enroll. Because job markets — especially in the technology sector — can change rapidly, coursework that serves the

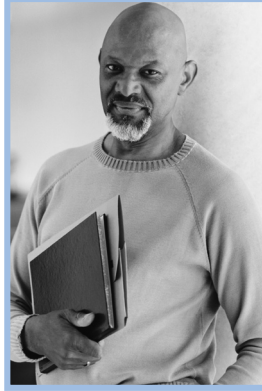
immediate purpose of job training but does not allow adult students to work toward the larger goal of baccalaureate attainment may not serve the needs of these students.

Also, to accommodate the intermittent enrollment patterns of many adult learners, financial support for less-than-half-time and intermittent enrollment must be available. With half of all adult students employed full time and many others supporting families, only a small share attempt the 12- to 15-credit course loads that traditional students undertake. Given these work and family responsibilities, adult students will greatly benefit from flexible financial aid and other strategies designed to support part-time study.

Third, courses should be made available to fit the daily routines of adult learners. Convenience is crucial. Evening, weekend and hybrid courses that combine face-to-face and online segments should be offered, along with accelerated courses. A 12-month academic calendar, continuous admissions and "just-in-time" enrollment opportunities are extremely important when serving adult learners.

Perhaps most important, our findings strongly encourage degree mapping for adult students. A "map" should sequence the courses specific to each program of study and be linked to clear and reliable estimates of the time required to earn a degree. Providing this clear path allows students to see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.





## Adult learner success and course credit

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**B**usiness and industry drive workforce training, providing almost half of all work-related courses. American businesses spent more than \$50 billion to train employees in 2004. This money often is invested in non-credit-bearing courses offered through continuing-education programs and contract education. A significant portion of this curriculum includes work-related classes to prepare learners for license examinations, to upgrade job skills, to retrain for new occupations and to provide training classes customized for a particular industry.

Our survey data suggest that continuing-education enrollment is only slightly more likely to be for credit (53.6 percent) than not (46.4 percent). Therefore, independent of their long-term educational goals, many adult students are not fully eligible for federal financial aid. Federal subsidies are linked to the credit hour; non-credit-bearing

course hours are generally not eligible. Adults would be best served by federal aid policies that support credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing programs alike.

Institutions may also fail to understand the complexities of curriculum development for the two types of courses. State funding for credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses varies

widely, and the institutional allocation of subsidies and expectations for these courses is poorly documented. Many institutions contribute to the lack of information by separating their non-credit offerings from their regular offerings.

Autonomy in course design and delivery further isolates non-credit courses. Moreover, the pace of academic decision making conflicts with the ad hoc nature of many non-credit-bearing programs and thus wedges the two sides further apart. As HigherEd.org Inc. researcher John H. Milam has

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discovered, these circumstances have often led to the development of a "hidden college" of non-credit course options that has flourished without a deliberative approach or sufficient attention to the needs of its adult learners.

Curriculum development relies on resource allocation at the institution, system and state level. Our research indicates that policymakers at every level are insufficiently informed about the need for balancing credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses offered for adults and other learners in light of changing labor market demands and student aspirations. More than 1,200 surveys and many interviews, site visits and case studies with leaders and administrators of postsecondary institutions revealed that 39.5 percent of institutions are not now collecting data on their non-credit-bearing courses. Although such courses are widespread, these academic programs may not sufficiently acknowledge the possible impact of non-credit-bearing courses on a public agenda that will soon demand the talents of college-educated adults.

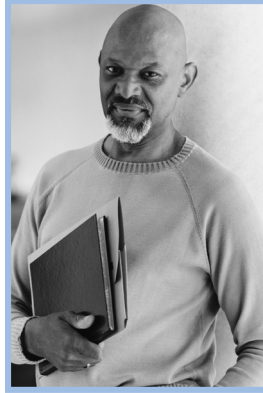
Milam also found a paucity of existing data and little prior research on non-credit-bearing courses. The obscure nature of the not-for-credit enterprise means that little is known about adult student enrollments in those courses, even by the programs that produce them. Institutions must address these concerns. The proliferation of non-credit-bearing courses and

the growing awareness of the value of credit for students seeking advanced certificates and degrees demand more attention to resource allocation for students in all courses.

### What institutions can do

- Develop instruments for tracking the number of credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses and for tracking student enrollments and student characteristics in those courses.
- Track resource allocation to credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses.
- Provide students with detailed information on the impact of credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses on short-term and long-term postsecondary attainment and lifetime earnings.
  - Work with industry and community partners to develop credit-bearing, pre-baccalaureate programs that offer labor market training and credit toward future postsecondary degree attainment, particularly in emerging areas of knowledge and expertise.
  - Integrate non-credit and English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) education with larger strategies for student success and mobility, with transitions to credit-bearing courses and sustainable employment markets.

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## State and national policies shaping adult learner success

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**O**ur research also has examined the ways in which state and national policies shape adult learner access and success. As part of ongoing research on subsidies and labor market conditions in relation to student access, University of Virginia economist Sarah E. Turner has noted that state investment patterns have significant implications for adult learners. Turner found that adult student enrollment reflects changes in local labor markets more than enrollments of traditional-aged postsecondary students do. During economic downturns, adult learners are more likely to return for further schooling. However, when economic conditions deteriorate, states tend to reduce their allocations to public postsecondary institutions. This reaction constrains

the ability of public institutions to increase adult learner enrollments at a time when those learners most need access. As a result, adult learner enrollments shift from public two-year and four-year institutions to more expensive private and proprietary alternatives — institutions that may have better access to the capital needed to support

enrollment increases. State policymakers can enhance adult learner access by balancing resource allocations so that public institutions can better respond to adult learners during economic downturns.

University of Virginia project researchers David W. Breneman and Brian

Pusser have turned attention to another important policy consideration that concerns the traditional view of adult learners in the postsecondary policy arena. The policy community has long stereotyped

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**State policymakers can enhance adult learner access by balancing resource allocations.**

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adult learners, seeing them primarily as displaced workers and homemakers seeking to enter the job market, a group in need of relatively short-duration job training. This view has neglected the richness and complexity of the lives and aspirations of adult learners. As a result, most state policy attention and resources have coalesced around vocational retraining programs, contract education and non-credit-bearing programs that provide short-term job skills and employment. Such programs are certainly needed, but if policymakers support them exclusively, they neglect some of adult learners' most crucial needs.

As one example, an analysis of Colorado's 2003 Higher Education Trust Fund legislation found that it was designed to create student opportunity through new forms of competition between Colorado's postsecondary institutions.

That competition also created the possibility of disproportionate financial challenges for part-time and adult learners, especially for those enrolled in community colleges. Furthermore, the Colorado legislation, like other emerging state financial aid policies that increase student choice, requires students to gather information more effectively and rapidly to compete for funding and enrollment slots. The increased demand for students to act as informed and effective consumers places a disproportionate burden on adult learners who attempt to fulfill their multiple obligations while attending college.

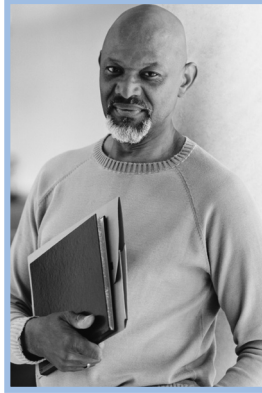
National policies regarding certificate and degree programs demonstrate a similar pattern. New legislation governing institutional accreditation, transfer credit and institutional assessment as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) suggests that adult learners and the institutions that serve them will need to adapt at the state level to keep pace with rapid changes. Legislation proposed under HEA reauthorization will offer opportunities and

challenges for adult learners, and institutions must respond wisely. Policy changes also will compel students to make more informed, personalized choices about their educational investments and their plans for recouping those investments.

### What policymakers can do

- To maintain individual quality of life and the economy of the state, state policymakers need to establish financial aid programs for working adult learners.
- State and national policymakers must rethink short-term skills training for employment. Students will derive greater long-term benefit where this training provides credit toward completion of the baccalaureate degree.
  - State policymakers need to support efforts to increase institutional and state data collection on enrollments in credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses.
- State policymakers need to devote attention and resources to incorporating adult learners in P-16 models of postsecondary access and success. Although two-year institutions play a key role in these models, they are generally designed to serve traditional students. P-16 models that recognize adult learners' intermittent enrollment patterns, preparation gaps, and financial challenges will bolster the success of those learners as well as the health of families, communities and economic-development projects.
- Policymakers need to work with institutional leaders, state workforce-development authorities and the business community to coordinate effective policies for workforce development and adult learner education.

State policymakers need to support efforts to increase institutional and state data collection.



# Conclusion

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**T**he Emerging Pathways research suggests that new avenues to postsecondary attainment are emerging for adults, bringing with them unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Given the increasingly complex array of institutions and forms of delivery, researchers, policymakers and postsecondary stakeholders must lead an effort to thoughtfully assess the risks and rewards of the new models. They also must share their findings widely to ensure that investments in adult learning — whether public or private — lead to optimal benefits for individuals and society.

That process must begin by identifying the diversity of adult learners' needs in order to focus on those adult students who are most at risk of failure. In that same spirit we must identify the unique challenges and obligations that shape access and success in the postsecondary arena.

Institutional officials, business leaders and policymakers must reconsider their commitment to the typical, short-term labor market training programs for adult learners. Our fundamental challenge is to respect these programs while we adapt them to the 21st century labor market — a market in which the baccalaureate degree

is increasingly vital to long-term success. To achieve that goal, we need to understand patterns of enrollment in credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses. These patterns can guide the creation of pre-baccalaureate certificate and training programs that give learners transferable, college-level credit and general education.

Working with students, institutions can develop mapping and planning strategies to increase student confidence in managing short-term needs and longer-term aspirations. In the same spirit, policymakers can work with business and industry

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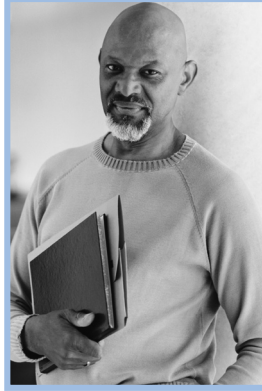
**New avenues to  
postsecondary attainment  
are emerging for adults,  
bringing with them  
unprecedented opportunities  
and challenges.**

---

to provide meaningful and flexible subsidies that will reflect the changing realities of today's college students. They will also need to build on successful policies for P-16 planning and resource allocation, devising similarly comprehensive and effective state and national programs for adult learners.

In the 21st century, our nation needs to maximize the potential of adult learners to face

global challenges. Adult learners can support the nation's efforts to increase global competitiveness, but adult learners need their national institutions to support them in the pursuit of their personal aspirations for credentials and degrees. We will all benefit if we meet our obligation to adult learners, their families and the institutions that serve them.



## More information on Emerging Pathways

**Editor's note:** The authors have published a wealth of related and supplementary material as part of the Emerging Pathways project. To obtain that material — highlights of which are summarized in the list below — visit: <http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/emergingpathways>.

- **The Hidden College.** In *The Hidden College: Noncredit Education in the United States* (2005), authors Richard A. Voorhees and John H. Milam argue that a large slice of the learning marketplace operates beyond the view of public policy. Non-credit programs operating under the aegis of traditional higher education institutions purportedly serve millions of adults each year, yet there is little research or data collection in this area. It is very difficult to trace enrollment volume in alternative pathways. Also, no national data document the programs that attract adult learners. It's impossible to understand nontraditional pathways to college without taking into account this "hidden college." This national

study of non-credit course activity included 81 survey responses from state organizations (94 percent) and 1,176 institutions (60 percent), interviews with key informants, a comprehensive literature review, and an analysis of existing national datasets of NCES, AACC and others. The complete results are presented in Milam's chapter entitled "The Role of Noncredit Courses in Serving Nontraditional Learners" in Pusser's (ed). *New Directions for Higher Education* volume, *Arenas of Entrepreneurship: Where Nonprofit and For-Profit Institutions Compete*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (2005).

- **Arenas of Entrepreneurship.** In *Arenas of Entrepreneurship: Where Nonprofit and For-Profit Institutions Compete* [ed., Brian Pusser; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (2005)], experts assess the relative competitive advantages of for-profit, nonprofit and public institutions engaged in the "business" of providing postsecondary education to a variety of

students with diverse needs and preferences. Areas explored in the compiled articles include: entrepreneurship in public and nonprofit higher education institutions, continuing-education programs and summer sessions, the business culture of the community college, the role of non-credit courses in meeting the needs of nontraditional students, the role of the regionally accredited for-profit institution, and the impact of market forces on higher education's public purpose.

- **Rise of the For-Profit Model.** In "Entrepreneurship in Higher Education," another article in the *Arenas of Entrepreneurship* collection, David W. Breneman notes that "a common set of economic pressures has led the various sectors of higher education to adopt entrepreneurial models." This essay examines the rise of entrepreneurial and for-profit postsecondary institutions and suggests some implications for the future organization of higher education.
- **National Continuing-Education Studies.** The Technical Reports for the 2004 *National Survey of Students in Continuing Education* and the 2004 *National Study on Continuing Education* [Gallaway, N.; R. Catania; M. Parker; B. Gansneder. Charlottesville: University of Virginia (2005)] provide descriptive information from two surveys on the nation's continuing-education students (n = 1,518) and programs (n = 709). Tables are presented to summarize institutional characteristics, admissions and academic services, course offerings and program characteristics, funding mechanisms, financial aid availability and educational expenses.
- **Pell Grants as Fiscal Stabilizers.** This volume [Turner, S. E., *Pell Grants as Fiscal Stabilizers*; Charlottesville: University of Virginia and NBER (2003)], points out that cyclical fluctuations in labor market

opportunities lead to increased demand for postsecondary education as the opportunity cost of enrollment falls during bad economic times. Enrollment depends on both the capacity to finance college and the availability of opportunities in local higher education institutions. The Pell grant program and other forms of federal financial aid provide an important source of capital for investments in education and vocational training, while also serving as fiscal stabilizers. For-profit colleges and universities are particularly responsive to changes in enrollment demand driven by local economic conditions, as these institutions are likely to concentrate on short-term programs that may be particularly appealing to potential students in response to transitory changes in the labor market. In addition, because the same cyclical forces affecting local labor markets adversely affect state appropriations for public colleges, these colleges have limited capacity to respond to the cyclical shocks.

- **Post-Baccalaureate Futures.** This work [Kohl, K. J. and LaPidus, J., *Post-Baccalaureate Futures: New Markets, Resources, & Credentials*. Phoenix: American Council on Education and Oryx Press (2000)] points out that, as the workplace moves into the 21st century, post-baccalaureate education will play a role in the lives of millions of college graduates. This new book explores the issue from a variety of higher education perspectives, including: How will/should higher education respond to expanding demands for post-baccalaureate learning? How will competition from the private sector challenge the universities' monopoly? How will new technologies facilitate entry into higher education? How will the learning-centered paradigm and technology-mediated instruction affect faculty? How will post-baccalaureate education be seen as a revenue source to subsidize other parts of the institution? This book is designed to help a wide audience of higher education officials understand



the challenges facing their institutions — and how they need to respond. (Note: The Emerging Pathways Web site provides a link to the publisher's site, where the book can be purchased for \$34.50.)

- **Lifelong Learning Trends.** *Lifelong Learning Trends: A Profile of Continuing Higher Education* [University Continuing Education Association, Washington, D.C. (2006)] points out that, where nontraditional students were once the exception, they are now the norm. Adults 24 and older represent 43 percent of undergraduates, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Also, today, a majority of the graduate and first-professional students are enrolled at the master's level and attending on a part-time basis. *Lifelong Learning Trends* represents an effort to gather in a single publication relevant national data about trends and participation in college and university continuing and professional education. The charts in this book have been derived from data developed by UCEA, as well as by scholars, government, and private organizations. This is the ninth edition of *Trends*, a book originally published by the association in 1990. (Members of UCEA can purchase it for \$36; non-members, \$45)
- **View from the Community College.** John S. Levin offers an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Nontraditional Students and Community Colleges: The Conflict of Justice and Neoliberalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Also presented

are links to some of Levin's presentations, including the following:

- *Street-level bureaucrats: Actions granting justice to nontraditional students*. Paper for the annual meeting of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Long Beach, Calif. (April 2006).
- *Nontraditional students and community colleges: The conflict of justice and neoliberalism, an overview*. Paper for symposium for the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal (April 2005)
- *Is nontraditional student a bad word?: Examining the social construction of the term and its implication for administrators' perceptions of their students*. Paper (with Robinson, E.) for the annual meeting of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Boston (April 2005).
- *Lifelong learning and the corporate college: The community college as an extension of neoliberal ideology*. Paper for the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Kansas City, Mo. (November 2004).
- *The community college and the accommodation of nontraditional students*. Paper for the annual meeting of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Minneapolis (April 2004).
- *Students beyond the margins*. Paper for the annual general meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Portland, Ore. (November 2003).



# About the authors

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**Brian Pusser** is an assistant professor in the Center for the Study of Higher Education of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. His research focuses on the politics of higher education, the organization and governance of postsecondary institutions, and the role of government policies in shaping the success of adult and nontraditional learners. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of California at Santa Cruz, a master's from Stanford University, and a doctorate in higher-education administration and policy analysis, also from Stanford.

**David W. Breneman** is the dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, where he has served since 1995. He is a former president of Kalamazoo College and was visiting professor at the Harvard School of Education from 1990 to 1995, where he taught graduate courses on the economics and financing of higher education, on liberal arts colleges, and on the college presidency. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado and a doctorate in economics from the University of California at Berkeley.

**Bruce M. Gansneder** is the Curry Memorial Professor in Research, Evaluation and Statistics in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. He is a research methodologist specializing in research design and survey research. He holds a bachelor's degree from Seattle University, a master's from Iowa State University and a doctorate from Ohio State University.

**Kay J. Kohl** serves as executive director and CEO of the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA). Before coming to UCEA, Kohl served in planning, program and development positions with Goldmark Communications Corp., the Educational Foundation and the National Policy Panel on Space Communications and the United Nations. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota, master's degrees from Columbia University and the Tufts University Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, and a doctorate from Columbia.

**John S. Levin** is the Bank of America Professor of Education Leadership and the director and principal investigator of the California Community College Collaborative. He is a widely published scholar in the United States and an acknowledged expert on community colleges in Canada. He has a bachelor's degree from the University of British Columbia (UBC), a master's degree from York University, and a doctorate in education from UBC.

**John H. Milam** held positions at the University of Houston, West Virginia University, George Mason University, and the University of Virginia before founding HigherEd.org, Inc., in 2002. He provides consulting about knowledge management, cost analysis, national datasets, online learning, data and technology for federal and state agencies, foundations and associations. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Goddard College and a doctorate in education from the University of Virginia.

**Sarah E. Turner** is associate professor of education and economics at the University of Virginia. She has published numerous works on the effect of financial aid on collegiate attainment and the link between higher education and local labor markets. In 2002 she received the Milken Institute Award for Distinguished Economic Research for her work on the paper, "Trade in University Training." She holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton University and a doctorate in economics from the University of Michigan.





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