



FINISH for YOUR FUTURE

FULFILLING OHIO'S ADULT LEARNER PROMISE

Report of the Adult Learner Working Group

OVERVIEW

September 2020



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In January of 2019, the Ohio Department of Higher Education convened an Adult Learner Working Group to review and prioritize, at the campus and state levels, suggestions for an adult learner engagement plan.

Created as part of a Lumina-supported Adult Promise Grant, the Working Group comprised diverse representatives of adult postsecondary education stakeholders, as well as a range of business and industry, community, and nonprofit leaders. Their collective charge was to develop recommendations for better serving adults age 25 and older who want to earn degrees, certificates, and other quality credentials beyond a high school diploma.

Building on past successful initiatives, the Working Group has produced a report entitled [***Fulfilling Ohio's Adult Learner Promise: Report of the Adult Learner Working Group***](#). Based on extensive analysis of research, data, trends, and best practices, the Working Group has identified 24 recommendations for enhancing adult learner success by (a) building upon high-impact practices, (b) closing equity gaps, (c) improving policy, and (d) demonstrating return on investment for postsecondary educational providers, students and families, and employers.

As you review the Working Group's report, we encourage you to consider this question:

“What can I do to help advance the recommendations in the Working Group's report?”

The report's many great ideas will have limited impact if we don't make a commitment to accept accountability for results and take action. Following are suggestions for how three critical stakeholder audiences can demonstrate support and make a difference.

Target Audience: Governing Boards of Postsecondary Institutions

Governing Boards will play an important role in advancing the Working Group's recommendations by ensuring their institutions accommodate adult learners' life demands via consistent course offerings; flexible start-and-stop options; complete and transparent program package information; part-time, competency-based education (CBE), online and hybrid options; support services beyond the traditional workday hours; and business partnerships for on-site offerings and workplace opportunities. To assist your institution in making a transformative change, consider the following actions:

- Think beyond the conventional, iterative budgeting process of allocating a fixed amount of resources to continue existing operations and instead apply a Return on Investment (ROI) model to identify opportunities to invest in new initiatives. This can be a valuable tool to help your institution think long-term about the cost and benefits of deploying the recommendations in this report.
- Take note that the demographics of the "customers" we serve are shifting – and that our institutions must keep pace. Institutions are discovering that the lifestyle, educational, and financial needs for adult learners require a different approach to make your institutions more adult-friendly in programming and practices.
- Obtain data about the number and percentage of adult learners in the student body as well as success rates of students disaggregated by age, race, ethnicity, and PELL status.
- Lead discussions of expectations for integrating equity and equity-mindedness throughout your institution.
- Work with campus leaders to set goals for increasing the percentage of adult learners on your campus and to address disparities among the student population.

Targeted Audience: Campus-Level Leaders, Faculty, and Staff

The traditional “one-size-fits-all” approach for 18-to-24-year-old, full-time students misses the mark for adult students who hold work and family responsibilities as priorities in their lives. When considering postsecondary education, adult learners ask themselves the following questions:

- What will it cost me?
- What will be my return on investment?
- And, importantly, how will I fit education within my busy life?

Institutions that can successfully answer those questions and that value the real-world knowledge, skills, and experience adult learners bring to the table will see increased adult student enrollment, high completion rates, and enhanced student loyalty. Consider the following recommendations as you strive to provide adult learners with the certainty and flexibility they are looking for when they seek to continue their educational journey.

- Ensure that your institution is publicizing, offering, and tracking PLA, and assess all incoming adult students’ prior learning and award appropriate credit for college-level learning that has been achieved outside the traditional classroom.
- Modify programs to make them more adult-friendly, e.g., offering predictable course scheduling (including nights and weekends), accelerated degrees, CBE, and online and hybrid course options.
- Offer professional development opportunities for faculty, including adjunct faculty, that focus on the unique needs of adult learners.
- Provide financial assistance that meets the specific needs of adult students, e.g., debt forgiveness programs, emergency loans, affordable childcare, scholarships targeted to returning adults, and so on.
- Engage in stronger connections with business and industry to assure workplace experiences are part of the education process and provide optimal hiring opportunities for adult learner graduates.
- Define equity and what it means to you and your institution, and make a commitment to reduce equity gaps as a component of your institution’s Campus Completion Plans.

Target Audience: State Policymakers

A well-educated workforce is key to Ohio's economic success. With reduced numbers of 18-to-24-year-old students in the demographic pipeline, state policymakers must turn their attention to educating substantially more adults age 25 and older. In addition to helping keep college affordable through state subsidy and need-based financial aid, state policymakers play a role in communicating higher education's ROI for the learner and the community at large.

State policymakers also have a role in helping adults understand the full range of postsecondary education opportunities available in Ohio (short-term certificates to graduate degrees); the wide array of postsecondary institution types in the state (Ohio Technical Centers, public colleges and universities, and independent colleges and universities); and for providing assistance to adult learners seeking to connect with educational programs that will best fit their educational needs. Consider the following opportunities for action:

- Provide additional funding for grants, scholarships, and emergency aid programs targeted specifically to adult students. Further investment in adult learners will benefit those students, their employers, and Ohio's economic health.
- Direct the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) to create policies that ensure all adult learners will be assessed for prior learning and awarded appropriate credit for that learning, thereby saving students time and money.
- Work with the Ohio Department of Higher Education, the Ohio Association of Community Colleges, the Inter-University Council of Ohio, and Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Ohio to increase adult FASFA completion — all adults should be encouraged to complete a FAFSA as part of the postsecondary application process and annually while in school.
- Provide a pathway for adult learners with unpaid institutional debt at Ohio public colleges and universities to re-enter college under a "debt forgiveness" program.
- Launch a statewide marketing campaign to communicate how increased education impacts the lives and prosperity of individuals and communities and directs adults to the resources needed to plan their educational journeys.
- Require ODHE to establish a standing Adult Learner Advisory Group and annually report to the Governor and General Assembly on the success of adult learners in the state.

Looking Ahead

Ohio is committed to providing affordable and equitable educational opportunities to adult learners. State and institutional leaders must identify and develop practices to help adult learners minimize the amount of time they spend in class and the time to degree completion while maximizing economic payoff for their effort. Our success at helping an increasingly diverse student body accomplish their educational goals will translate to financial stability, economic mobility, and a job-ready workforce for our state.

Thank you in advance for your help in promoting and implementing the recommendations put forth by the Adult Learning Working Group. We know that by working together, we will vastly improve the adult learner experience in Ohio.

