



***POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS OF YOUNG ADULTS:  
SYSTEM IMPACT OPPORTUNITIES IN ADULT EDUCATION  
Executive Summary***

Young adults who come through adult education are among the most under-represented students in postsecondary education. In most states, when a young adult leaves high school and enrolls in adult education, the value placed on his or her education drops six-fold or more, as measured by a cost per student per year. Both systems share the same goal of graduating the young person with a secondary credential. Both systems suffer from a misalignment of curricula and assessments with postsecondary education. Similarly, in most states governed by postsecondary education system, adult education students are not funded or recognized as full members of their institution’s community. According to our study, this is beginning to change.

***About the Study***

In March 2010, the National College Transition Network (NCTN) at World Education, Inc. received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to investigate the field of adult education-to-postsecondary transition in 17 states<sup>1</sup> as part of the foundation’s Postsecondary Success initiative. This gave the NCTN staff an opportunity to dialogue with a third of the state directors of adult education in the United States about the college and career readiness policies and practices in their states, including four in-depth interviews covering Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio and Washington. Central to this discussion was identifying specific policies and practices that help students maintain academic momentum from adult education to and through college to a postsecondary credential.

***College and Career Readiness Policies and Practices***

Adult education is in a position to contribute insights and strategies to the Postsecondary Success initiative to make sure that adults in need of further education can benefit from the opportunities offered by postsecondary institutions. Our interviews identified strategies aimed at addressing critical junctures (“loss points”) when students are most apt to quit and that adult education can address: transition from adult education to college level or the highest level developmental courses or certificate programs and sufficient college readiness skills to complete of the first year of college. Both require the adult education system to extend its mission and services “beyond the GED” while also raising the skills and aspirations of young and

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<sup>1</sup> Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, Texas, Vermont, and Washington State.

older adult learners who test in a pre-secondary levels. In all 17 states we investigated, there were more young adults enrolled at pre-GED levels than at the secondary level, indicating the relatively low literacy levels of young adults being served by the adult education system.

The study focused on policies and practices in seven overarching (and often overlapping) categories. Most states are doing something in each category, but no state is yet fully implementing a complete range of policies and practices within each category.

Overarching Categories	Policies and Practices
1. Planning and Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting the System Goal</li> <li>• State-level Workgroups</li> <li>• State Strategic Plans</li> <li>• Data Tracking Within and Across Systems</li> </ul>
2. Models of College and Career Readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State Supported Models</li> </ul>
3. Assessment and Advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advising and Counseling for Transition</li> <li>• Career Awareness and Planning</li> </ul>
4. Comprehensive Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equal Access to College Supports</li> <li>• Wraparound Supports</li> <li>• Student-level Financial Incentives</li> </ul>
5. Acceleration Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult to Postsecondary Alignment</li> <li>• Dual Enrollment</li> <li>• GED Plus or Integrated Instruction</li> <li>• Contextualized Instruction</li> <li>• Modularization and Chunking of Curriculum</li> <li>• Preparing for the College Placement Test</li> </ul>
6. Funding Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal Incentive and Leadership Funds</li> <li>• Office of Vocational And Adult Education (OVAE) Initiatives</li> <li>• State-level and Performance-based Funding</li> <li>• Local District Funding</li> <li>• Private Funding</li> </ul>
7. Youth-specific Issues and Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing High School Completion Policies</li> <li>• Youth-focused Programs</li> </ul>

Table 1 State Policies and Practices Identified in the Study

## Recommendations

The study resulted in recommendations aimed at state and national adult education leaders and private and public funders. The adult education field's efforts to date suggest that significant reform efforts can be initiated at the state or regional level or spearheaded by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) at U.S. Department of Education, the federal funder of adult education. Each of the four recommendations requires building partnerships, implementing key strategies, conducting and applying research to document effectiveness, and coordinating funding.

### 1. **ADVOCACY**

**Advocate for increased awareness and support for adult education system among college and workforce leaders and policymakers.** At present, the adult education system has been largely invisible to many college leaders and policymakers, and grossly underfunded. Yet, this system is the first point of re-entry into education for most youth who have left school prematurely. Advocacy that translates into system-level support manifests itself through policy changes and resources.

**Partnerships:** Adult education must be a full partner in federal, state and local policy initiatives and boards or workgroups that spearhead reforms in employment and education. More than token representation, this means that such policy initiatives take into account the key features that shape the adult education system, such as prevailing standards, accountability structures, staff capacity, and of course, funding. Substantial change is not possible without partnerships among institutions and systems that are committed to closing completion gaps for all students.

**Strategy:** Design and deliver a communications strategy for college and workforce leaders and policymakers that conveys the value of college and career readiness for adult education students, their communities and the local economy; include formats and templates that can be easily individualized for each state.

**Research:** Conduct a Return on Investment (ROI) study to describe the impact of a seamless pathway from adult education to and through postsecondary education on individuals, families, communities, and employers in order to inform public awareness campaigns and advance the public policy agenda; include comparisons with other programs with similar goals.

**Funding:** Institute equitable funding formulas that support the provision of services that prepare students for college and careers, including both academic and nonacademic services. While most states invest a greater proportion of funds than the federal government, the current funding levels for adult education simply do not make possible the implementation of optimal college and career readiness services, in most cases. There is evidence from several states that an effective advocacy strategy can yield increased state appropriations for adult education, even during the economic downturn.

## 2. SCALABLE MODELS

**Identify and scale effective delivery models.** While one program model may not serve all adult education students in all communities, strategies have been identified that increase the likelihood of student success. The most effective college and career readiness delivery models aim to align the adult and postsecondary systems and accelerate student progress while providing academic and non-academic supports. What tend to vary are specific acceleration strategies.

**Partnerships:** With support from key state-level leaders, adult and college educators need to partner to design clear and realistic college and career readiness pathways and postsecondary options that can be scaled and further tested. Such pathways encompass referral protocols and system-wide agreements about what demarcates adult and developmental education.

**Strategies:** Implement program models that focus on system alignment and use a combination of acceleration strategies, such as dual enrollment, contextualized learning, modularization, integration of college and career readiness instruction with GED or adult diploma programs, and interactive technology that engages learners. Such program models should also include career planning and wraparound support for students on campus and in the community.

**Research:** (1) Conduct research to understand how acceleration strategies can be best implemented with different adult education populations and levels akin to the series of studies on promising strategies to accelerate success in community college being conducted by the Community College Research Center. (2) The field would also benefit from research that addresses the pedagogical question of how best to serve young adults – through distinct youth-oriented strategies and programs or side by side with older adult learners, or some combination of both.

**Funding:** (1) Calculate the cost of implementing the recommended college and career readiness acceleration strategies so that adequate funding can be sought. (2) Institute funding policies that promote co-enrollment in postsecondary education and access to career planning and WIA Title I employment services for adult education students.

## 3. CLEAR DEFINITION OF READINESS

**Assess attainment of college and career readiness within the adult education system and completion of first year of college.** One of the most challenging and frustrating aspects of transitioning adults to postsecondary education, for both students and educators, is the lack of a clear definition of what it means to be ready for college. We recognize that operationalizing a more nuanced definition (beyond level of placement in college) is challenging. Emerging student-level benchmarks of success, such as those developed in Washington State, could be used on a national level. What we propose here are some short- and long-term solutions.

**Partnerships:** (1) Work with college partners to provide access to the college placement test (COMPASS, ASSET, ACCUPLACER) as a measure of academic readiness while students are still in

adult education so they can complete their preparation if they are not found to be academically ready. (2) Institute peer learning so that adult education directors and staff can learn from those who have successfully developed and implemented data tracking across systems.

**Strategies:** (1) Define college readiness as more than academic readiness to recognize the complex career and personal readiness needed for adults to be successful, and use this definition to inform practice. (2) Reformulate the National Reporting System (or at least data collection at the state level) to track goal attainment across fiscal years and reflect key milestones in adults' readiness and enrollment in postsecondary education data collection so that students who have received college and career readiness services in adult education can be disaggregated from other students.

**Research:** (1) Study whether the reliance on current college placement tests as an academic readiness measure predicts students' ability to succeed in college. (2) Investigate how the adoption of the GED 2020 and/or the possible adoption of the Common Core State Standards would impact adult education.

**Funding:** Fund the development of aligned assessments and longitudinal data tracking capacity at the state level.

#### **4. CAPACITY BUILDING**

***Build the capacity of program staff to implement this systems change agenda.*** Approximately 80% of adult educators nationwide work part-time, typically without many benefits, and receive most of their adult education training while in-service. The implementation of effective college and career readiness services requires ongoing professional development for teachers, counselors, and administrators. Our study suggests that intensive professional development is needed to both build capacity and inform the field. While adult educators need to learn more about college and career readiness, many pedagogical strategies used in adult education are ones that postsecondary educators can learn from, such as competency-based learning, differentiated instruction, and intentional use of multiple persistence strategies.

**Partnerships:** Provide joint professional development for adult and postsecondary educators and opportunities for learning across institutions.

**Strategies:** Provide learning opportunities for adult educators using multiple strategies and venues, including online courses and communities of practice across institutions and states that entail peer sharing and mentoring. Structure professional development by creating a National College and Career Readiness Specialist and/or Program certification, based on the results of a feasibility study.

**Research:** Identify the knowledge and skills a College and Career Readiness Specialist needs and how competence should be assessed. Or, alternatively, identify College and Career Readiness program standards and quality indicators. Investigate certification options that include incentives for adult educators and programs to pursue such a certificate.

**Funding:** Fund the development of a National College and Career Readiness Specialist or College and Career Readiness Program certificate program. Build career pathways and improve working conditions to retain adult educators and administrators in the adult education field and motivate them to pursue further training in the pre-college and college and career readiness field.

Given that ultimate success is measured by completion of a postsecondary degree or certificate by adult education students, reforms in other parts of the education system, particularly community colleges, will need to take place concurrently in order for adult education to do its part toward the end goal.

Adult education is poised to benefit from an infusion of support for system level reform. The national legislation that shapes it, the Workforce Investment Act, will be reauthorized over the next year. All signs point to the new legislation containing much greater emphasis on college and career readiness and pathways. Several states have developed and are piloting models that hold great promise. As a full partner in system reform across the education spectrum, adult education stands to deliver its part in the college completion process for the benefit of tens of thousands of young and older adults who currently fall through the cracks of that process.

To download *Postsecondary Success of Young Adults: System Impact Opportunities in Adult Education*, go to [www.collegetransition.org](http://www.collegetransition.org)