

Making a College Degree Convenient, Accessible and Low-Cost

Stakeholder Perspectives on Adult College Completion Efforts

In order to reach the various goals for postsecondary degree completion in the United States set by higher education leaders and funders in recent years, it is vital to look beyond traditional-age students who enter college directly from high school and increase higher education opportunities for adult students. Within the population of adult students are many who already have some higher education experience. As of 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that more than one-fifth of Americans age 25 and older—43.5 million people—have earned some college credit but not a degree or certificate. While some of these adults are currently enrolled in college, many more are not and therefore represent a very promising target for programs that promote college access and success.

Such programs have taken a wide variety of approaches to engaging adults with some college credit. Some postsecondary systems are identifying students who have already earned sufficient credit to receive a degree or certificate and ensuring they receive that credential as well as reaching out to students who have left college and encouraging them to return. Colleges and universities are also exploring innovative academic programs oriented to the needs of adult students, from workforce-focused programs that offer stackable credentials and clear pathways to careers to practices such as competency-based education and credit for prior learning that take into consideration the skills and knowledge returning adults students may have acquired since leaving college. A number of states are engaged in statewide efforts to promote adult college completion. From web portals that help adult students find the best degree program for them and adult degree completion programs, accessible to any state resident through online education, to consortia of adult-friendly postsecondary institutions that work together to promote adult degree completion, these statewide programs expand the reach of individual postsecondary institutions to a wider audience of adult students.

In this brief, Higher Ed Insight—an evaluation and consulting firm with a mission to improve college access and success—explores the perspectives of a range of adult college completion stakeholders, in an effort to better understand how adult college completion efforts are progressing across the nation and what strategies stakeholders consider most important to increasing college completion among adults with some college credit. The findings in this brief are based on a survey administered online by Higher Ed Insight in February 2014 to 145 adult college completion stakeholders, including representatives from postsecondary institutions; national and regional higher education associations; state postsecondary systems and higher education agencies; national research organizations and technical assistance providers; and foundations. Potential respondents were identified based on recommendations from Adult College Completion Network members and experts in the field of adult education. The overall survey response rate was 41%. This research was supported by Lumina Foundation.

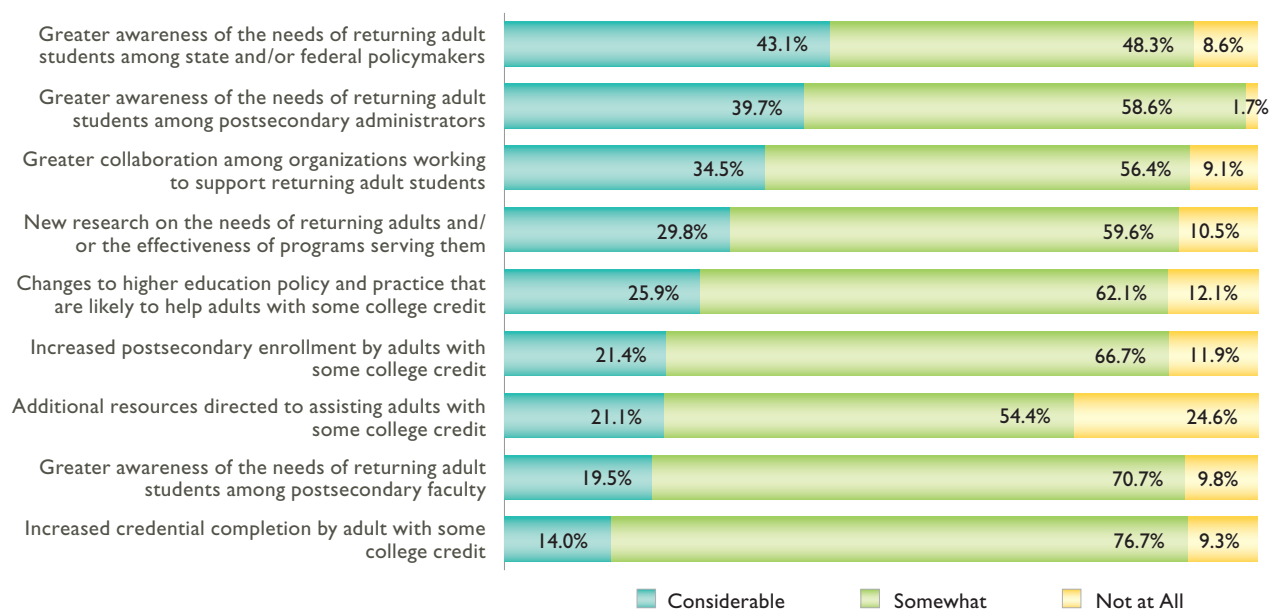


Key Finding #1: Awareness of the needs of adult college completers is growing, but resources remain scarce.

Many stakeholders report seeing at least some increased awareness about the needs of returning adult students among two groups in particular: postsecondary administrators (98%) and state and/or federal policymakers (91%). Survey respondents also indicated that they see some greater collaboration among organizations working to support adult students (91%) and new research on returning adult students' needs and/or the effectiveness of programs designed to serve them (89%). However, only 76% of stakeholders report observing at least some additional resources directed to assisting adults with some college credit, and only 21% report seeing considerable increases in resources directed to this area, suggesting that funding and staffing to support adult college completion programs will continue to be a challenge.

In terms of student outcomes, only 21% of respondents said they are seeing considerable growth in postsecondary enrollment by adults with some college credit, and only 14% said they are seeing considerable growth in degree or certificate completion by such students. On the other hand, relatively few respondents said they are not seeing any increased postsecondary enrollment (12%) or completion (9%) by adults with some college credit, which suggests that this group of stakeholders is beginning to see the needle move in terms of improved outcomes for returning adult students. However, a few survey respondents are less than optimistic about the prospect of change. As a representative from a state higher education agency put it, *“Part of what is needed is disruption. A new thing that creates a market of supply and demand for adult learning. Yesterday’s and today’s academy is not up to the task.”*

CHART I: Stakeholders’ Observations of the Prevalence of Adult College Completion Outcomes



Key Finding #2: Outreach to adult students who need only a few credits to complete a college degree or certificate is seen as a promising strategy.

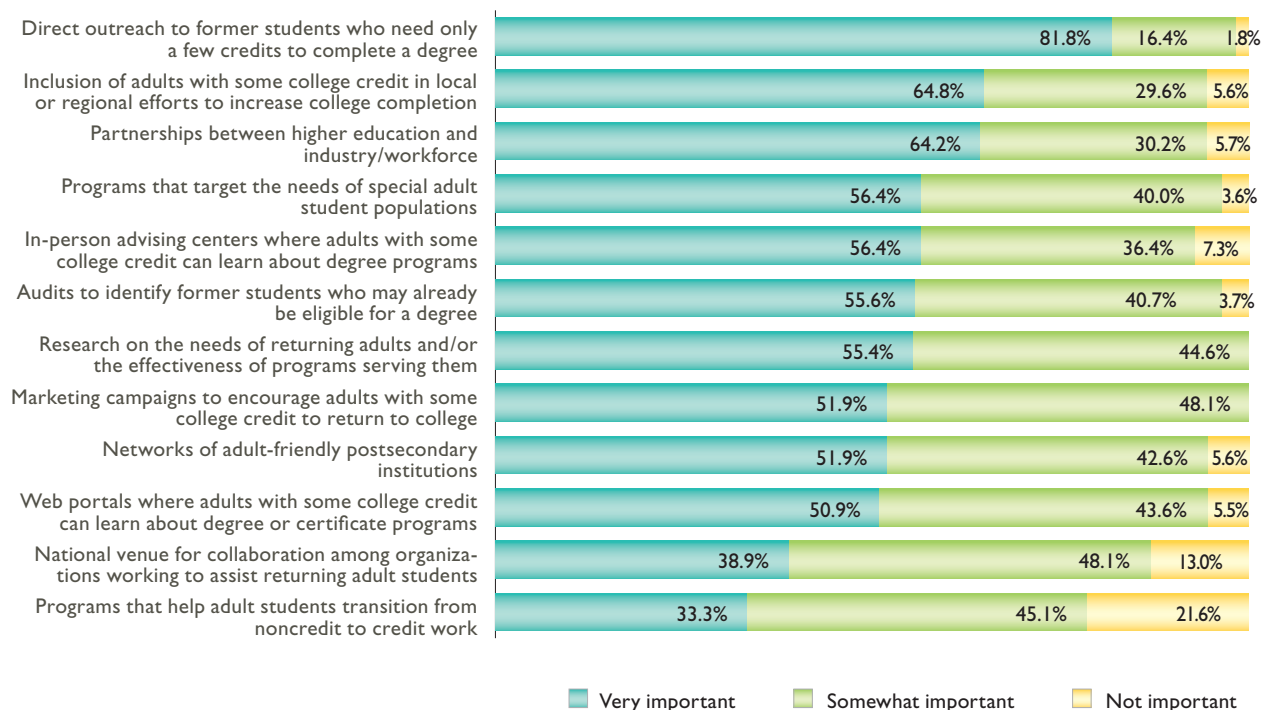
The vast majority of survey respondents (82%) see direct outreach to former students needing only a few credits to complete a degree as a very important strategy for increasing adult degree completion. However, there are challenges that adult college completion programs face in re-enrolling this student population, key among them the need for extensive outreach campaigns and personalized assistance in helping students re-enroll in college, both of which require substantial investments of time and resources.



Other strategies to increase adult college completion identified as very important by a majority of stakeholders include:

- Inclusion of adults with some college credit in local or regional efforts to increase postsecondary completion (65%)
- Partnerships between higher education and industry/workforce to develop academic programs focused on workforce needs (64%)
- Programs that target the needs of special adult student populations such as veterans, older adult students, or unemployed individuals (56%)
- In-person advising centers where adults with some college credit can learn about degree programs (56%)
- Audits to identify former students who may already be eligible for a degree (56%)
- Research on the needs of returning adult students and/or the effectiveness of programs serving them (55%)
- Marketing campaigns to encourage adults with some college credit to return to college (52%)
- Networks of adult-friendly postsecondary institutions that work together to coordinate policy and practice in serving returning adult students (52%)
- Web portals where adults with some college credit can learn about degree or certificate programs (51%)

CHART 2: Stakeholders' Ratings of Strategies for Increasing Adult College Completion



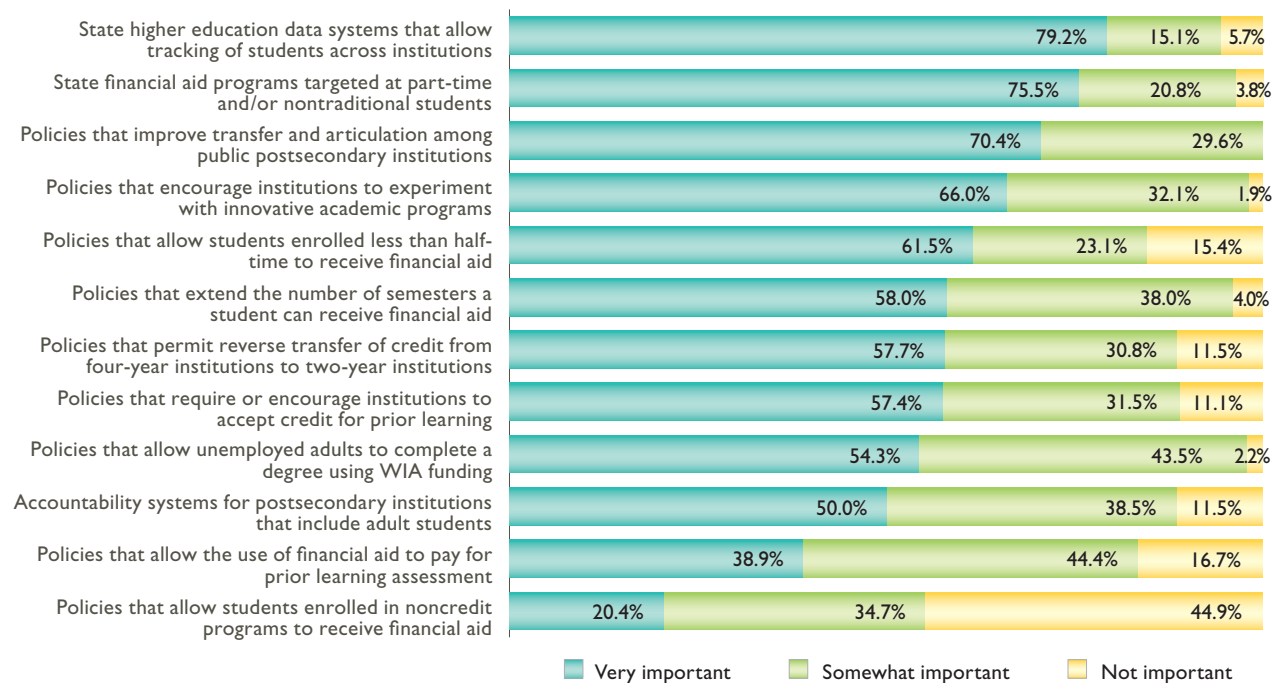


Key Finding #3: Improved data for tracking students, financial aid targeted to adult students, improved transfer of existing college credit, and innovative academic programs are key policy levers for increasing adult college completion.

Many stakeholders indicate that state higher education data systems that allow tracking of students across institutions (79%), state financial aid programs targeted at part-time and/or nontraditional students (76%), and improved transfer and articulation among public postsecondary institutions (70%) are very important policies for increasing adult college completion. These responses emphasize the importance of state-level commitments to increasing adult degree completion since state policy has considerable clout in all of these areas, at least for public postsecondary institutions, and tends to be more flexible than federal policy.

The importance placed on these policies by survey respondents reflects the mobility of college students across postsecondary institutions as well as significant concerns about the cost of college. One institutional stakeholder made this latter point when he said, “*The number one barrier for adult learners to return to college is finances. They do not have the money to pay the tuition and related costs. Financial aid does not cover part-time enrollment adequately. Organizations need to provide scholarships and child support funds.*” Two-thirds of respondents also consider allowing colleges and universities to experiment with innovative academic programs to be very important for increasing adult degree completion. As a respondent from a postsecondary institution explained, “*Traditional delivery systems are ineffective with adult learners. Research has proven this many times. Policies need to incent colleges and universities to try different modalities and structures with adults.*”

CHART 3: Stakeholders’ Ratings of Federal and State Policies Related to Adult College Completion



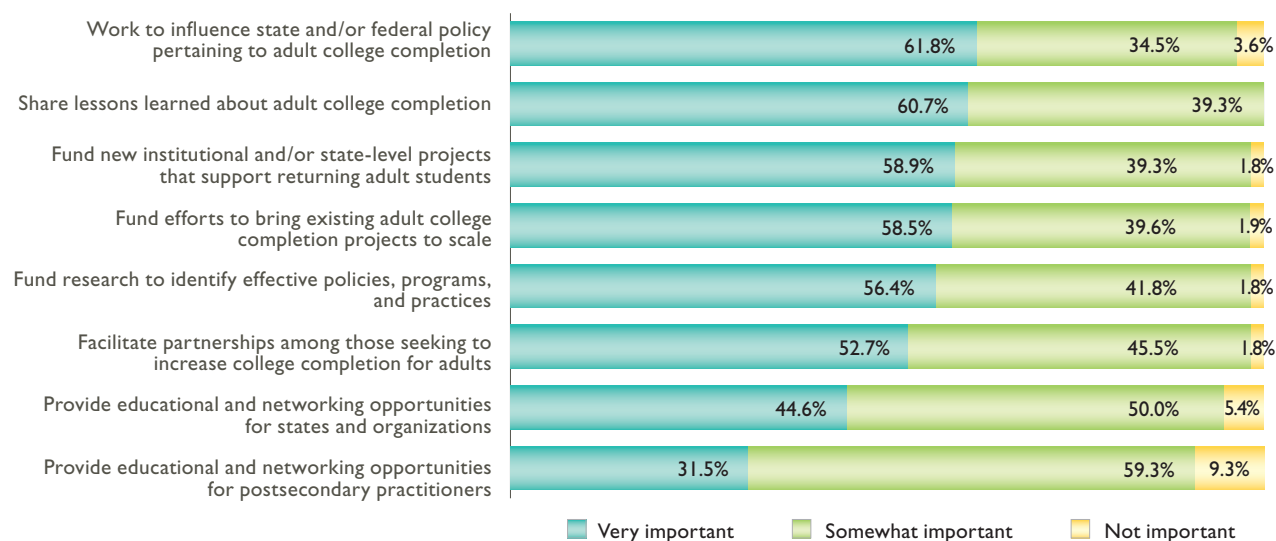
Key Finding #4: While funding new and existing adult degree completion projects is important, educating and influencing policymakers is a must.

Stakeholders emphasize the importance of continuing to influence state and/or federal policy related to adult college completion (62%) as well as sharing lessons learned about adult college completion with federal, state, and higher education leaders (61%). Many survey respondents (59%) also see funding new adult degree



completion projects and scaling up existing ones as very important, but respondents overwhelmingly point to a crucial role for foundations and other leading non-profit organizations to serve as conveners and advocates to promote stronger policies that will increase degree completion among adults with some college credit. One institutional stakeholder, for example, argued that a key action for such organizations would be to “*continue to educate college presidents, legislators and other policy bodies in the tools to identify and work with students to move to completion as well as work to eliminate barriers from the institutional level up through federal policy. Encourage a climate of a student’s right to achieve a credential without being blocked by unnecessary rules and policies.*”

CHART 4: Stakeholders’ Ratings of Potential Actions to Support Adult College Completion



Key Finding #5: Consensus is not easy, and different stakeholders hold different views of how best to increase adult college completion.

Survey respondents were generally in agreement about the importance of supporting returning adult students. As a respondent from a foundation noted, “*Making a college degree (loosely defined) as convenient, supportive and low-cost [as possible] is the best thing we can do to support these students.*”

Nonetheless, throughout the survey responses, stakeholders from different types of organizations varied significantly in their opinions about the various strategies and policies they considered of most importance to this work. In particular, representatives from postsecondary institutions and state postsecondary systems often had quite different perspectives from the respondents who represent regional or national organizations. These differing opinions highlight the challenges of bringing together and reaching consensus among the many groups that have a role to play increasing adult college completion.

For example, stakeholders from individual postsecondary institutions were considerably more likely than other survey respondents to consider very important policies that allow unemployed adults to complete a degree using Workforce Investment Act funding (72% versus 43%) and policies that allow the use of financial aid to pay for prior learning assessment (62% versus 24%). This suggests that institutional stakeholders are particularly sensitive to the cost barriers that affect adult students and the lack of financial aid funding to help students in non-traditional situations. Institutional and state level respondents were also more likely than



respondents working at the regional or national level to see as very important a number of strategies that have been central to a number of state adult college completion efforts, including:

- Web portals where adults with some college credit can learn about degree or certificate programs (69% versus 20%)
- Research on the needs of returning adults and/or the effectiveness of programs serving them (69% versus 33%)
- Marketing campaigns to encourage adults with some college credit to return to college (63% versus 31%)

On the other hand, stakeholders from national research and technical assistance organizations were far more likely to identify as very important policies that require or encourage institutions to accept credit for prior learning (85% versus 49%). This difference may reflect the fact that, while credit for prior learning has been a hot topic in national higher education policy circles, it may not be as crucial a priority for stakeholders from postsecondary institutions and systems. In addition, concerns about quality in prior learning assessment were raised by several stakeholders in open-ended responses. One institutional stakeholder explained, *“Quality matters—I hate to see adult education go down the road of simply credentialism. Adults can still learn, they may just learn differently than traditional. I agree that adults should get credit for prior learning, but we can take this too far. Schools must find a balance between credit for prior learning, and offering a quality learning experience.”*

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