Getting to the Finish Line:

State and Metro Area Strategies to Increase College Completion by Returning Adults

Many states and metropolitan areas have recognized the urgent need to increase college attainment in order to ensure a supply of educated workers to support their economies. Lumina Foundation, in its recent strategic plan, also identified the mobilization of stakeholders in metro areas and other regions as a key pathway to increasing educational attainment in the United States. To address this need for more college graduates, a number of states and metro areas have developed initiatives targeting adults with some college credit who have not yet completed a postsecondary credential.

This brief presents findings from the third year of HigherEd Insight's evaluation of Lumina's adult college completion initiative. Rather than examining only projects that were funded under the initiative, these findings also include state and metro area adult college completion efforts that were not funded under the initiative but have been involved in the Adult College Completion Network.[1] Earlier findings from this evaluation emphasized that "addressing the complex circumstances and barriers these students face requires attention to the entire pipeline from making contact with prospective students to overcoming barriers to re-enrollment

and ultimately to supporting them in completing a college credential" (Erisman and Steele 2012). Accordingly, the brief seeks to address the range of ways in which states and metro areas have begun to reach out to and support returning adults in their quest to complete college.

State Strategies

A number of states, including several with large populations of adults with some college but no degree, are engaged in statewide efforts to promote adult college completion. In some states, these efforts are coordinated by the state higher education agency, in others by a state college or university system. While most states are still in the early stages of their adult college completion work, some have begun to see promising results. In particular, Georgia, in which only selected state universities are part of the state's Adult Learning Consortium, has noted that the institutions in the consortium have seen a 7% increase in adult enrollments over the last several years versus a less than 1% increase in adult enrollments for other public institutions in the state. Colleges that have been part of the consortium for three years or longer have seen an 11% increase in adult enrollments. Moreover, representatives from a

---

[1] The Adult College Completion Network is managed by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) as part of Lumina's adult college completion initiative. For more information on the Adult College Completion Network, see its website at www.adultcollegecompletion.org.

number of statewide adult college completion projects have indicated that their outreach and marketing efforts may have the longer-term impact of increasing awareness of adult student needs among campus constituencies and encouraging state colleges and universities to make adult students a greater priority, a process of cultural change that they see as a key outcome of this work.

State Strategies for Outreach and Marketing to Returning Adults

A common approach to reaching adult students with some college credit has been efforts by state college and university systems to contact students who have stopped out of system institutions and encourage them to return to school. Major Lumina-funded efforts using this approach include Indiana's Ivy Tech Community College Adult Degree Completion Project and Graduate Minnesota, sponsored by the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities. These projects use data-mining techniques to identify former students who have not earned a degree and send them a personalized mailing, in some cases followed up by an email or phone call. Both of these efforts have seen somewhat mixed results, with a number of students returning to campus and earning additional credits but others proving difficult to reach due to student mobility and the many barriers adults face when considering a return to college. At Ivy Tech, for example, only 9% of former students responded to an initial attempt to reach those with at least 45 credits, but the response rate increased to 17% when the college reached out to students who had earned at least 15 credits.

In addition to efforts to directly contact stop-outs from specific colleges and universities, several states have undertaken statewide marketing campaigns. One advantage to this broader marketing approach is that it may reach students who may have previously attended college outside the state or who would like to return to college but not at the same institution they originally attended. Georgia's statewide marketing campaign—Discover Your GOAL (Georgia Opportunities for Adult Learners)—is focused on the tagline "What is a degree worth to you?" Ads were developed as radio spots, online ads, billboards, posters at bus stops, and bus wraps. Graduate Minnesota took a similar approach. Using several taglines such as "Is college calling you back?," the state created radio, newspaper, and Facebook ads that direct students to the Graduate Minnesota web portal or to a toll-free phone number that would connect them with an experienced advisor at a statewide call center. West Virginia's DegreeNow program has also done some statewide marketing, including billboards, television, radio, and newspaper ads, as well as a behaviorally and geographically targeted online marketing campaign that placed ads on local, regional, and national news and retail websites, Pandora online radio, Google Search, and Facebook.

In addition to their statewide marketing efforts, some states provide branded materials that participating postsecondary institutions can tailor to their needs. Kentucky's Project Graduate and West Virginia's DegreeNow both use this approach, making branded materials available for individual institutions to customize and use as needed. Colleges and universities that offer Oklahoma's Reach Higher adult degree completion programs also receive funding to engage in marketing and are expected to use branded materials to develop marketing plans that promote adult degree completion in their regions.

States that have undertaken adult college completion marketing campaigns typically emphasize the importance of market research. Georgia, before starting its statewide campaign, conducted online and telephone surveys to get at reasons why students left college, their motivations for returning, and potential barriers they would have to overcome to succeed. As the campaign developed, focus groups were used to test the messages used in various advertisements. This research found that it was important for students to see people in the ads with whom they could

identify and to hear messages that highlighted the value of a college education. Texas, on the other hand, conducted focus groups and surveys after its Grad TX website was launched and learned that some assumptions made about the target audience may not have been accurate. In particular, this market research showed that a substantial majority of prospective students were over age 40. Many of these older returning adults were motivated by a desire to complete something they had begun more than by financial or career concerns and did not identify with what they perceived to be typical (i.e. younger) college students. These findings have led Grad TX staff to conclude that future marketing messages should be more differentiated, particularly by the age of the potential student, and should address a range of motivations for returning to college. In addition, Grad TX staff plan to better target future marketing efforts to local areas in the state that have high concentrations of adults with some college credit.

The cost of a major marketing campaign can be a significant challenge, and some states have begun to think about alternative ways to reach adults with some college credit. West Virginia has collaborated with its university extension service and its state GEAR-UP college access program to do some grassroots outreach aimed at adults with some college credit, including the parents of K-12 students participating in GEAR-UP. Outreach through employers is another potential strategy for reaching adults with some college credit. In developing partnerships with businesses for the SUNY Works co-op and internship program, program staff members have learned that many business owners are interested in identifying academic opportunities for their own employees who have some college but no degree. As a result, the program's outreach efforts to employers and chambers of commerce now include a pitch about how businesses can help their employees obtain a postsecondary credential. Another potentially productive area for outreach is collaboration with local one-stop workforce centers. SUNY

Works, for example, has trained representatives from one-stops around the state so that those individuals can counsel adult learners on available SUNY programs. In a larger effort, a program coordinated by the Rutgers Center for Women and Work and the National Association of Workforce Boards is working in several states to help design policies and practices that would make completion of a college degree an option for individuals participating in the workforce development system.

Several states are using a centralized web portal as a way of providing information to the prospective returning adult students contacted through their outreach efforts. The Graduate Minnesota website, for example, focuses exclusively on stop-outs and includes on its homepage reasons why a former student might want to complete a degree, together with links to information about transfer of credit, college costs, and upcoming informational events at state colleges and universities. The site includes a search function to help prospective students identify campuses in their area and also provides ways to contact an advisor at a statewide call center via toll-free phone number, email, or web chat. Louisiana's Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana (CALL) website, on the other hand, is tailored to accommodate adult students with different levels of education, including those with no college experience. Selecting the "some college" link on the CALL home page sends students to a flowchart diagramming the process of returning to college. Each step in the flowchart includes links to additional information and resources, including descriptions of adult degree completion programs offered by participating institutions, explanations of how to earn credit for prior learning, and practical information on financial aid and other topics.

The Grad TX website, which has attracted over 27,000 unique visitors in the two years since its launch, provides links to college-going resources, offers strategies for balancing school with work and family needs, and includes success stories from adults who returned to college to complete a degree.

It also gives prospective students information about degree completion programs available at selected Texas postsecondary institutions, including contact information for an advisor at each institution who is experienced in working with returning adult students. Where the website goes further is in allowing prospective students to enter information about college credit already earned and providing an unofficial transcript evaluation showing how the student's credits might transfer at different schools. This credit transfer tool was of particular interest to adults with some college credit who participated in usability studies for the website, and 52% of prospective students surveyed through the website indicated that using the tool gave them additional motivation to return to college (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

Taking a web-based approach to transfer and articulation is an area of growing interest for states. Georgia, for instance, is in the process of developing a transfer and articulation web portal that will enable students to look at the transferability of credits from both the state university and technical college systems as well as from other accredited institutions in the state and from military service transcripts. However, lessons learned from the Texas effort suggest that practical and technological challenges still exist. In particular, Grad TX staff found that participating universities could not always provide adequate information on transfer equivalencies and that the use of different student information systems by different institutions made it impossible for students to simply import a transcript into the credit transfer tool rather than entering all courses by hand. In addition, while 44% of Grad TX website users who responded to a survey had tried using the credit transfer tool, 27% of those respondents found it difficult to use, suggesting a need for further refinement of the tool (Rapaport and Rolf 2013).

State Strategies for Providing Targeted Support to Returning Adults

States with adult degree completion programs have found that providing appropriate support services for returning adult students is essential to helping these students remain enrolled and complete a postsecondary credential. Many states have a policy of designating a single point person at each participating college or university to whom returning adult students can turn for assistance with any aspect of the college experience and note that this personal contact can be a crucial source of support for these students. Both Minnesota and Ivy Tech, for example, have designated contacts on each institution's campus who have expertise in the needs of returning adult students. When prospective students call the phone number listed on marketing materials in these states, they reach a trained advisor at a statewide call center who can give them general advice on returning to college and can also connect them to a specific contact person at the relevant campus.

Some states—including Georgia, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas—have also found that it is helpful to direct returning adults to the colleges and universities that are best positioned to serve them. These institutions are likely to be those that already have a strong orientation toward serving non-traditional students and, in many cases, offer one or more degree completion programs targeted at adults with some college credit. In some states, there are also institutions with substantial populations of military and veteran students that are well-positioned to meet those students' special needs. On the other hand, in most states, there are also public universities—particularly flagship and other research-oriented institutions—that serve relatively few adults and are unlikely to do so in the future.

In response to this recognition of differing institutional missions, several states have established networks of state colleges and

universities that are oriented toward serving adult students and work primarily with those institutions in their efforts to promote adult degree completion. Requirements for participation in state adult degree program networks vary. Institutions that receive support from Louisiana's CALL must have online and accelerated course offerings, provide student services appropriate for adult learners, and offer some form of prior learning assessment. Georgia's Adult Learning Consortium, which currently has 13 institutional members and expects to add seven more this year (out of the 31 institutions in the University System of Georgia), is open to any interested institution, but members must commit to a set of voluntary protocols that help ensure consistency in practice across the consortium. Texas, on the other hand, chose to launch its Grad TX program by conducting a competitive RFP process. Eight institutions were selected based on their history of working with adult students, the infrastructure they had in place to support adult students academically and socially—including advisors trained to work with returning adults—and the existence of polices such as reverse transfer agreements and scholarships for adult students. Similar factors—together with location, which can help ensure that degree programs are available in geographical areas with concentrations of adults with some college credit—will be used to select additional institutions to the Grad TX program in the future.

Having an active statewide network of adult-friendly institutions helps promotes the idea that adult college completion is a group effort. This collaborative approach has not always been the norm in higher education and demonstrates a move to approaching adult college completion from a student-centered perspective in many of the states engaged in adult degree completion work. One particular benefit of a statewide network seems to be creating opportunities for campus-level faculty and staff whose work focuses on adult students to learn from one another. Participation in the network also helps ensure that adult degree completion coordinators from each institution know one another and can direct students to a coordinator at a different campus if needed. Ivy Tech, for example, has its 14 Regional Adult Degree Completion Advisers meet regularly via conference call and has also sponsored joint workshops with Indiana University to provide an opportunity for faculty and staff from both institutions to connect around the topics of adult degree completion and supporting adult-student transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. Oklahoma regularly brings together its Reach Higher coordinators to share ideas about how to better serve returning adult students while Kentucky, despite losing much of the funding for its Project Graduate, has continued to convene meetings of the project's campus representatives so they can strategize about ways to continue to re-engage and support stop-outs at each institution.

The development of common institutional policies around key areas related to adult learners is another benefit of statewide networks of adult-friendly institutions. Georgia is a clear leader in this area. The executive committee of its Adult Learning Consortium, made up of campus representatives from both academic and student affairs, meets regularly to discuss what is happening on each campus and identify areas where policy change is needed. A typical approach for the group is to look at each institution's policies in a certain area, such as accepting various forms of credit for prior learning, and then work out a policy that will be used by all member institutions in the future. Once consensus is reached on this policy, a formal agreement is drawn up and signed by each campus's president and vice presidents for academic and student affairs. As a result, the 13 campuses currently in the consortium have consistent policies regarding acceptance of credit for prior learning and use a common vocabulary on their adult-focused web pages.

While some states limit participation in their statewide networks, others have opted to include all or most public colleges and universities in their

adult college completion work. Kentucky, for example, had intended to designate one institution to house its new adult degree programs, but push-back from other universities led the state to move toward a collaborative model instead. Similarly, Ivy Tech's Adult Degree Completion Program and Graduate Minnesota both include all of the institutions in the sponsoring systems. The challenge with this approach, however, is that it requires making sure all participating institutions can effectively serve returning adult students. Returning adults have very different needs than younger, first-time students. Some postsecondary institutions are better prepared than others to provide flexible course schedules, offer advising and student services at night or on weekends, analyze multiple transcripts to assess transfer credit, and offer credit for prior learning.

One way to address this issue is to provide outreach and training to faculty and staff members at participating institutions to help them become more aware of adult student needs. West Virginia's DegreeNow program, for instance, has undertaken a major effort to expand the capacity of faculty and staff to serve returning adult students. Using a train-the-trainer model developed in partnership with NASPA, the program initially engaged selected student affairs professionals in a three-day workshop focused on best practices for working with adult learners. These trainers, in turn, offered shorter workshops at colleges across the state. A survey of participants in the shorter workshops indicates that many of these individuals have returned to their campuses and begun work to strengthen existing programs and services for adult learners or develop new ones. As West Virginia has continued to use this approach to train additional trainers from student affairs, it has also expanded the program and is working with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning to offer training for faculty members and academic affairs professionals on topics such as prior learning assessment and advising adult learners. West Virginia has also

made an effort to provide ongoing information to workshop participants and other campus stakeholders through its quarterly DegreeNow newsletter and a bi-monthly electronic newsletter. In addition, the state commissioned NASPA to develop a guide to help institutions evaluate their programs and services and has plans to produce a similar guide on working with adult learners.

State Strategies for Structuring Academic Programs to Meet the Needs of Returning Adults

Since statewide adult completion efforts are typically coordinated by state higher education agencies or college and university systems, they are able to highlight adult completion programs already in place at the state's public postsecondary institutions. These projects most often steer students to existing institutional programs that have been intentionally designed to serve the needs of returning adults. In many cases, these degree programs include an associate's or bachelor's degree in general studies with requirements tailored to the needs of the student, such as the Regents Bachelor of Arts and Board of Governors Associate in Applied Science degree programs offered by public colleges and universities in West Virginia.

Several states are also beginning to develop collaborative degree completion programs that draw on the strengths and resources of multiple state institutions and offer opportunities for adult students to complete a degree regardless of their geographical location within the state. Starting in Fall 2012, several West Virginia universities began to offer online courses leading to the Regents Bachelor of Arts through the Remote Online Collaborative Knowledge System (WVROCKS). Georgia is working on collaborative online degrees specifically designed to serve adult military populations that will integrate credit earned through military service into the degree programs. In Kentucky, building on the experiences of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System in creating its online Learn on Demand program,

the Kentucky Adult Higher Education Alliance plans to create several collaborative, competency-based bachelor's degrees aligned with state workforce needs and targeted to adult students.

Some of these collaborative degree programs are more fully developed than others. Both Oklahoma and Louisiana currently offer an online bachelor's degree in organizational leadership that is a collaborative effort across several state universities. These programs are targeted to adults with substantial college credit (72 credits in Oklahoma and 60 in Louisiana) and are offered in an accelerated format of five eight-week sessions per year. To participate in the program, students must apply to a home institution. In Oklahoma, this choice is usually made based on geographical proximity. In Louisiana, on the other hand, each participating university is sponsoring a specific concentration within the degree program, and students select a home institution based on the concentration in which they are interested. In both states, the program charges a flat fee per credit hour regardless of the student's home institution. These collaborative degree programs are advertised through each state's adult learner web portal and, with the same branding, through the participating universities.

Because many returning adult students have work and life experience that could translate into course credit, the issue of credit for prior learning is an important topic for statewide adult degree completion efforts but also one that is still in a state of flux. Several states report that many faculty members continue to be uncomfortable with some forms of assessment of prior learning, particularly portfolio assessment. A key strategy in promoting faculty acceptance of credit for prior learning seems to be outreach and education. Through teleconferences and twice yearly in-person faculty institutes that bring in national experts on teaching and learning, Georgia has undertaken a relatively slow and deliberate process of introducing faculty members to new forms of prior learning assessment (PLA). Staff members began by demonstrating

that nationally standardized PLA exams are as rigorous and as tied to recognized disciplinary curricula as are the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams with which faculty members are generally familiar. They then moved on to educating faculty about the rigor of the process used by the American Council on Education to evaluate corporate and military training for academic credit and about how to assess prior learning through locally developed challenge exams and student portfolios. Most recently, they have begun to use these educational forums to discuss competency-based education.

The University of Wisconsin System Prior Learning Expansion Initiative has taken a comprehensive approach to increasing the use of PLA within the university system. At the institutional level, grant funds were awarded to pilot institutions to assist them in expanding the use of PLA on their campuses. Three years into the project, 10 of the 14 UW institutions have undertaken this work. At the system level, a PLA Academic and Policy Task Force, composed primarily of faculty members, reviewed PLA policy and practice at UW and peer institutions and made general recommendations about PLA guidelines and best practices. In its work, the task force identified the transfer and transcription of credit awarded for prior learning as key issues the system would need to address. An Advisory and Implementation Committee—composed of both faculty and staff and including the project managers from all of the pilot institutions—then took up the work of developing specific policy recommendations in these areas. Another area identified as important by the initial task force was the provision of training and professional development to faculty and instructional staff. The implementation committee, after determining that many faculty members need fairly intensive one-on-one support in developing PLA tools and conducting portfolio reviews, created a system-wide consulting group comprised of faculty members from a range of disciplines. These consultants, who receive a

stipend for their work, are available to provide discipline-specific training and technical assistance to other faculty members. The implementation committee is also developing an online repository for PLA training materials and tools developed at UW or peer institutions so that these tools are available when faculty members need them.

Credit transfer and articulation have also been thorny issues for adult degree completion programs. Barriers that may prevent students from transferring academic credit from one postsecondary institution to another include limits on the total number of credits that may be transferred, limits on the age of credits accepted, requirements that a specific percentage of a student's credits be earned at the degree-granting institution, and difficulties in applying transfer credits to degree program requirements (as opposed to electives). Transfer of credit for prior learning is also a point of contention. In many states, for example, there is no guarantee that credit awarded through assessment of prior learning at one institution will transfer to another, even if both schools are part of the same university system.

Many of the issues around both transfer of credit and credit for prior learning seem to be coming to a head because of the burgeoning interest in developing collaborative and competency-based degree programs. Such programs, involving multiple colleges and universities and/or focusing on what students know regardless of exactly how they learned it, are likely to be an area of considerable importance to future adult college completion efforts. Such a move would have wide-ranging implications for higher education practice, including seeing how the federal government will treat credit for prior learning and competency-based degree programs in terms of eligibility for federal financial aid; working with the regional accrediting associations to clarify how their existing rules and regulations can incorporate credit for prior learning and competency-based programs; and examining graduate education so that future faculty members will be equipped to rigorously assess student learning rather than focusing primarily on delivery of course content.

Learn more about state adult college completion strategies

Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana	http://www.yourcallla.org
College Foundation of West Virginia	https://secure.cfwv.com/Home/_default.aspx *click on "Adult Learner"*
Georgia Opportunities for Adult Learners	http://www.georgiaonmyline.org/adultlearner
Grad TX	http://gradtx.org
Graduate Minnesota	http://graduateminnesota.us
Reach Higher Oklahoma	http://www.okhighered.org/reachhigher
University of Wisconsin System Prior Learning Expansion Initiative	http://web.uwsa.edu/vpacad/prior-learning-assessment

Metro Area Strategies

The National League of Cities points out that achieving significant increases in postsecondary attainment requires attention to adults with some college credit as well as to first-time college students, whether adult or traditional age (Cohen 2012). Metro areas, for the most part, seem to have recognized this imperative. In March 2013, HigherEd Insight conducted a survey of metro areas that are trying to increase postsecondary attainment rates with the support of CEOs for Cities' Talent Dividend Network and/or the National League of Cities' Postsecondary Success City Action Network. Survey participants included mayor's education advisors, directors of citywide education alliances, and representatives from local or regional chambers of commerce and local foundations. Nearly 80% of survey respondents indicated that their cities are developing outreach efforts specifically targeted toward working adults with some college credit. However, much of this work is still getting started. Among cities using this strategy, less than half (46%) of survey respondents reported that their efforts have been fully implemented while 23% indicated that they have begun a pilot or limited implementation and 32% said that their work with returning adults is still in the planning stages. As these cities move forward with their work with returning adults, they may develop new and innovative strategies to add to the ones outlined below.

For most of the metro areas surveyed, efforts to re-engage adults with some college credit are part of larger strategies around increasing postsecondary attainment. In Louisville, for example, the metro area has set a goal of increasing postsecondary attainment by 55,000 college degrees by 2020. The 55,000 Degrees initiative is a collaborative effort supported by the mayor's office, the public school system, and the regional chamber of commerce, as well as by local colleges, universities, businesses, funders, and community- and faith-based organizations. Based on demographic research, the leaders of this effort have concluded that adults with some college credit are an especially promising target audience for this work but are also focusing efforts on increasing college readiness and enrollment for traditional-age students. In a similar vein, Houston's My Degree Counts initiative, an effort to increase the city's overall postsecondary attainment rate by 1%, is organized into subcommittees for K-12 schools districts, community colleges, universities, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Several of these subcommittees have identified adults with some college credit as key targets for outreach.

Metro Area Strategies for Outreach and Marketing to Returning Adults

As with state strategies, some metro areas have used data-mining as a means of identifying and reaching out to adults with some college credit. In Houston, participating universities and community colleges committed to identifying stop-outs near to completing a degree and developing ways to both reach out to these students and support them when they return to school. Indianapolis, on the other hand, initially expected that near-completers would be an obvious target for outreach efforts, but research determined that many stop-outs still needed to earn a significant number of credits to complete a degree. In a smaller data-mining effort, the Denver Scholarship Foundation, after determining that more than a fifth of Foundation Scholars had left school without a degree, partnered with the Educational Opportunity Center at the Community College of Denver to reach out to these former students and provide them with financial and logistical support to help them complete a postsecondary credential.

Metro areas have also conducted media campaigns designed at encouraging adults with some college credit to return to college. In Omaha during the spring of 2012, the Talent Dividend steering committee recruited DJs from local radio stations with target audiences in the 25-44 age range to talk about the value of completing a college degree. The DJs were provided with

research-based talking points that they could use to encourage adults to return to college. Graduate Memphis, which focuses exclusively on supporting returning adult students, was able to get a weekly slot on a local television morning show, providing staff members with an opportunity to present information about the importance of college completion and to publicize the services available to help students return to college. Several metro areas have noted that human interest stories about adults who have returned to college to complete a degree seem to have particular impact for adults with some college credit. Both Tulsa and Houston, for example, share such stories via radio PSAs and videos posted using social media.

Some metro areas have identified direct outreach to major local employers as a key strategy for reaching adults with some college credit. In Louisville, the regional chamber of commerce has developed Degrees At Work, a program that recruits college advocates at local employers who can help employees at their companies find ways to return to college. The program administers a survey of employees at a participating business to identify those with some college credit who might benefit from the program, trains the college advocate so that he or she is able to provide preliminary help to those employees, and identifies points of contact at adult-friendly colleges and universities in the region to whom the college advocates can direct students. A similar program in Wichita—Achieve Kansas—is sponsored by Visioneering Wichita's College Mecca Alliance, a coalition of colleges and universities working to increase postsecondary attainment in the area. The coalition is reaching out to local businesses to identify employee educational needs, particularly for those who have some college credit but no degree, and to develop strategies to overcome the barriers that might prevent these employees from returning to college. Other metro areas, including Houston and Denver, have posted employer toolkits on the web, with information on why increased postsecondary attainment is important for employers and

what employers can do to support employees who wish to complete a college credential.

Metro areas have also explored outreach to other community organizations as part of their efforts to increase postsecondary completion among adults with some college credit. Nashville, for example, is working to train Workforce Investment Board career coaches so that they can identify and assist unemployed adults who might benefit from completing a college credential. Graduate! Philadelphia also works closely with local Workforce Investment Boards, including placing counselors at one-stop career centers in selected neighborhoods. Community-based organizations are another important partner for outreach. Houston's My Degree Counts website includes a toolkit for non-profit organizations that provides information on supporting college completion for the nonprofit's clients and surrounding community. Louisville has taken grassroots outreach a step further with its Count Me In! initiative, which asks community, civic, and faith-based organizations, as well as local businesses, to commit to taking action to contribute a specific number of college completers to the city's overall goal of 55,000 degrees.

Metro Area Strategies for Providing Targeted Support to Returning Adults

Adults with some college credit face a range of potential barriers when trying to return to school and can benefit from support as they go through the re-enrollment process. One approach used in several metro areas is to provide one-on-one support for these returning adults. A pioneer in this area is Graduate! Philadelphia, which since 2005 has served as a resource center for adults with some college credit who wish to return to school. Graduate! Philadelphia offers free advising at its centrally located outreach office, serves other Philadelphia neighborhoods through advising sessions at one-stop career centers and community-based organizations, and responds to questions from potential students via telephone

or email. In addition, the Graduate! Philadelphia website offers many resources to help returning adult students navigate the re-enrollment process, including a college search function that allows potential students to locate degree programs by geographical area, major, and program type (e.g. online versus in-person). Graduate! Philadelphia has had considerable success in supporting adults with some college credit as they return to school and now serves as the flagship for the Graduate! Network, which includes affiliates in Hartford, Chicago, Memphis, and Greensboro. Each of these affiliates operates in slightly different ways— Graduate Memphis, for example, has located its resource center in the downtown public library— but all are committed to the model of providing one-on-one support to returning adult students.

A particular challenge faced by metro areas that want to provide support services for adults with some college credit is cost. One-on-one advising programs like Graduate! Philadelphia can be expensive to establish and maintain, and each of the Graduate! Network affiliates has received financial support from national and local foundations, corporations, and/or workforce organizations. Some metro areas have elected to take a less expensive route by developing web portals that provide information—but not one-on-one support—to returning adult students in the region. Rather than simply including adults students as one category on a more general college access website, web portals such as Graduate Tampa Bay, Finish for Greater Tulsa, and Oklahoma City's Finish My Degree OKC focus on adults with some college credit and offer information on the value of completing a college degree, how to plan a return to college, sources of financial aid, opportunities to earn credit for prior learning, and degree programs available at colleges and universities in the area. While these web portals vary in the quantity and depth of information available, all do provide at least a basic starting point for an adult considering a return to college.

While metro areas can use advising centers and web portals to support adults with some college credit as they make plans to return to college, supporting these students once they actually re-enroll is also an important consideration and requires the involvement of the colleges and universities the students attend. Metro areas that are focusing specifically on re-engaging adults with some college credit have found considerable value in creating networks of adult-friendly institutions. Graduate! Philadelphia, for example, has an institutional advisory council with which staff members work closely to identify institutional policies that pose barriers to returning adult students and best practices to overcome those barriers and support students through graduation. Staff from participating institutions also provide pro-bono advising services at Graduate! Philadelphia's outreach center. Other metro areas projects have served as conveners for events focused on how best to serve adult students. In July 2013, for example, Denver's My Degree Matters Colorado project sponsored a statewide adult learning conference at which policymakers and higher education leaders and faculty could learn about topics such as accelerated and competency-based degree programs, credit for prior learning, cross-sector partnerships, and practices to support specific adult student populations such as veterans.

The cost of college can be a significant barrier that prevents adults with some college credit from completing a degree or credential, and metro areas have used a variety of strategies to address this barrier. In Providence, the Rhode Island Partnership Project is developing a statewide program to assist adults with some college credit return to school. A key aspect of this program will be working with colleges and universities, as well as the state student loan authority, to encourage the creation of programs to forgive or reduce existing loans for students re-enrolling in college. Foundations in both Columbus and Denver have provided funds for scholarships specifically designed to help adult

students remain enrolled in college. Perhaps the most comprehensive approach taken to this key issue is found in St. Louis, where the St. Louis Regional Chamber and Growth Association hosted two regional convenings with business and higher education leaders to discuss the issue of college affordability for adult students. These conversations resulted in a report (St. Louis 2012)

that outlines actions businesses can take to support employees who wish to return to college, including ideas such as creating scholarships for employees, allowing employees to use tuition assistance funds to cover prior learning assessment fees, and inviting financial counselors to the business site to educate employees about sources of financial aid.

Learn more about metro area adult college completion strategies

METRO AREAS

55,000 Degrees (Louisville)	http://www.55000degrees.org
Complete the Degree Chicago	http://www.completethedegree.org
Degrees at Work (Louisville)	http://www.greaterlouisville.com/degreesatwork
Degrees Matter! (Greensboro)	http://degreesmatter.org
Finish for Greater Tulsa	http://finishforgreatertulsa.com
Finish My Degree OKC	http://www.finishmydegreeokc.org
Graduate! Connecticut (Hartford)	http://www.graduatect.org
Graduate Memphis	http://graduatememphis.org
Graduate! Philadelphia	http://www.graduatephiladelphia.org
Graduate Tampa Bay	http://www.graduatetampabay.org
My Degree Counts (Houston)	http://www.mydegreecounts.com
My Degree Matters Colorado (Denver)	http://www.mydegreemattersco.org

NATIONAL SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

The Graduate! Network	http://graduate-network.org
Postsecondary Success City Action Network (National League of Cities)	http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/institute-for-youth-education-and-families/education/higher-education/postsecondary-success-city-action-network-(p-scan)
Talent Dividend Network (CEOs for Cities)	http://talentdividendnetwork.com

References

Cohen, Marjorie D. 2012. *Municipal Leadership for Postsecondary Success: Getting Started.* Washington, DC: National League of Cities. http://www.adultcollegecompletion.org/sites/files/documents/nlcGettingStarted.pdf.

Erisman, Wendy, and Patricia Steele. October 2012. *From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential.* Washington, DC: HigherEd Insight. http://www.adultcollegecompletion.org/sites/files/documents/higherEdInsightBrief.pdf.

Lumina Foundation. February 2013. *Strategic Plan 2013-2016.* http://www.luminafoundation.org/advantage/document/goal_2025/2013-Lumina_Strategic_Plan.pdf.

Rapaport, Amie, and Cheyanne Rolf. July 2013. *Adult Degree Completion Comprehensive Report Presented to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.* Austin, TX: Gibson Consulting Group.

St. Louis Regional Chamber of Commerce and Growth Association. July 2012. *College Affordability: Challenges for Adult Students and for Metro St. Louis.* http://www.stlrcga.org/Documents/library/Final%20Report%20on%20College%20Affordability%20-%20July%202012.pdf