

Executive Summary

Adult Learners: A Review of National and California Trends

Across the United States, [43.1 million adults have some college experience](#) but no credential, and [millions more have never enrolled](#) in postsecondary education. In California, more than [6 million](#) adults have some college but no degree, while [6.8 million](#) hold only a high school diploma. Many of these adults are interested in returning to school or pursuing new training opportunities, but they encounter barriers such as cost, time, and complex systems that were not designed with their realities in mind.

[This brief](#) draws on existing research to examine the barriers facing adult learners, defined here as individuals aged 25 and older with no education beyond high school or with some college but no credential. It also highlights promising policies and practices that can help more adults in California and nationally earn a postsecondary credential.

Barriers

Recent research highlights many barriers adults face when enrolling in or returning to college, including:

- Awareness and information gaps – uncertainty about where to start, what programs exist, and whether they belong in college after time away from school.
- Limited financial resources – little or no family financial support and restricted access to scholarships and grants, many of which are designed for recent high school graduates and do not fully cover college costs.
- Basic needs insecurity – financial stress resulting from food insecurity, unstable housing, lack of transportation, and child care costs.
- Institutional policies – complex re-enrollment processes, limited acceptance of prior credits earned, and rigid Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements.
- Time constraints – difficulty balancing work and family responsibilities with inflexible academic schedules, e.g. required classes during the workday.

Policy Recommendations

Practical steps that states and institutions can take to help adult learners start, return to, and complete postsecondary education:

- Expand financial aid access and flexibility to better meet adult learners' needs.
- Create campaigns and incentives to encourage re/enrollment.
- Award credit for prior learning to reduce both time and cost to complete a credential.
- Align SAP policies with student needs, including straightforward appeals processes and aid eligibility not contingent on prior SAP status.
- Offer more evening, weekend, and online classes to enable adults to balance their studies with family and work commitments.
- Establish case management systems to provide students with the academic and non-academic support they need to persist, including access to resources to meet housing, food and other basic needs.