

Adult Learners

A review of national and California trends

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Introduction

Across the country, adult learners are a growing and essential part of higher education. 43.1 million adults in the U.S. have some college experience but no credential, while millions more have never enrolled.^{1,2} Many want to return to education or pursue new training opportunities, but they face barriers such as cost, time, and complex enrollment systems that were not designed with their realities in mind.

California reflects these national trends. More than 6 million adults in the state have some college experience but no credential, while 6.8 million hold a high school diploma but no college degree.^{3,4} As traditional college enrollment declines, re-engaging adult learners is key to meeting the state's 70% postsecondary attainment goal by 2030 and sustaining a strong, equitable workforce.

This brief draws from existing reports to identify the barriers adult learners face and highlight promising policies and practices.

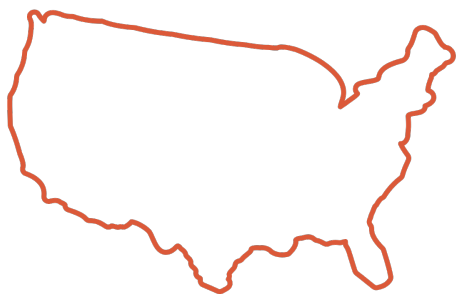
For this brief, when we refer to adult learners, we use the following definition:
individuals aged 25 and older who have no education beyond high school or who have earned some postsecondary credits but have not completed a certificate or degree.

The Adult Learner Landscape: National and California

Understanding the scope and characteristics of the adult learner population is essential for shaping policies that support enrollment, persistence, and degree completion. The data below highlights national and California-specific trends, illustrating both the scale of the opportunity and the barriers that remain for adults pursuing postsecondary education.

National Adult Learner Profile

The national data provides a broad picture of the adult learner landscape, including population size, fields of study, and educational outcomes.



Population Size	43.1M adults have some college but no credential ⁵ 82M have no postsecondary experience ⁶
Current Enrollment	6.3M adult college students enrolled, with 3.9M in undergraduate programs (of 19.4M total students) ^{7 8 9}
Field of Study	Concentrated in health professions, construction trades, and technical programs (mechanics, repair technologies) ¹⁰
Adult learners who are parents	48% of adult learners are parents ¹¹
Persistence	45% for students 25+ vs. 82% for those 20 or younger ¹²
Degree Completion	20% of college graduates are age 30 or older ¹³ 38% six-year completion rate for adults starting at age 25+ ¹⁴

California Adult Learner Profile

California mirrors national patterns, but with unique state-level dynamics in terms of population size, enrollment, and persistence.



Population Size	6.8M adults (25-54) have a high school diploma but no college degree ¹⁵ 6M+ adults (25-64) have some college but no credential ¹⁶ 56% of adults (25-64) hold a postsecondary degree or credential ¹⁷
Current Enrollment	934K adults (25+) enrolled in college, including 691,692 in undergraduate programs ^{18 19}
Adult learners who are parents	3.9M California parents do not have a college degree, 400K student parents are enrolled in California's public colleges ^{20 21}
Persistence	30.6% persistence rate for learners 25+ who started in Fall 2023 ²²

Note on data: Publicly available data offer useful insights about adult learners. However, there are still gaps, especially in information on race and ethnicity. Because the available sources were either incomplete or inconsistent, this data was not included to avoid misrepresentation. Continued efforts to improve disaggregated data collection are needed to better understand and support adult learners.

Motivations for Pursuing Postsecondary Education

Adult learners return to school with clear goals and purpose. Many seek to gain new skills, advance in their careers, and improve their financial stability. Others are driven by a desire for personal growth and the sense of accomplishment that comes from completing a degree. For some, learning itself is the reward, an opportunity to explore new ideas, challenge themselves, and set an example for their families and communities.

Adult learners earning a postsecondary credential benefit in significant ways. It leads to higher earnings, stronger job prospects, greater economic security, and a boost in confidence. For example, adult learners with a college degree increase their annual salary by 140% compared to their peers who do not return and are 22% more likely to achieve upward mobility.²³ Beyond earning credentials and boosting earnings, completing postsecondary education is tied to better health outcomes. Adults with more education are less likely to suffer from chronic illnesses, more likely to access preventive care, and, statistically, live longer lives than those with fewer years of schooling.²⁴

The benefits of an adult learner completing postsecondary programs extend beyond the individual.

Family

The positive effects ripple through families. Children of adults who complete college degrees or certificates are more likely to pursue and finish their own education, helping to break cycles of limited opportunity and fostering intergenerational success.^{25 26}

Institutional

Adult learners bring valuable experience, motivation, and perspective to campuses. As traditional-age enrollment declines, attracting and supporting adult learners helps sustain enrollment and strengthen learning environments that reflect the diversity of today's workforce. Re-engaging adults with "some college, no credential" is key to sustaining California's postsecondary pipeline.²⁷

Community

Higher education levels contribute to stronger local economies through increased earnings, higher tax revenues, and reduced reliance on public assistance. Educated communities also experience greater civic participation, stronger social networks, and improved overall well-being, creating a more resilient and engaged society.²⁸

Barriers Facing Adult Learners

Returning to college as an adult often means balancing work, parenting, and tight budgets while navigating systems built for traditional students.²⁹ The barriers listed below are the ones most consistently documented across recent research.

Barrier	Description
Awareness and Information Gaps	Adult learners who have been out of school for years often struggle to know where to start a postsecondary program. A scan of 350 institutional websites found that two-thirds failed to present adult-specific admissions or aid details. ³⁰ As a result, adults often have to rely on word of mouth or online searches, which can make the process feel confusing and overwhelming.
Financial Barriers	Rising tuition and living costs make it increasingly difficult for adults to return to college. Unlike traditional students, most adult learners can't rely on family support or full financial aid packages. ³¹ Because many scholarships target recent high school graduates, adults often depend on Pell Grants or loans, which rarely cover the full cost of attendance. ³²
Basic Needs Insecurity	For many adults, financial stress extends far beyond the cost of tuition. Food insecurity, unstable housing, and limited access to transportation can make it challenging to focus on coursework or remain enrolled. ³³ For adult students who are parents, balancing coursework with caregiving can be difficult, especially when affordable childcare options are limited.
Feeling Out of Place & Mental Health	A college environment that is largely designed for younger students can trigger feelings of isolation or self-doubt among adult learners. Many adults question whether they belong in school after years away, often wondering if college is the right fit for them. ³⁴ These feelings, combined with stress from balancing work and family, can take a toll on mental health and persistence. Adult learners who consider stopping out are twice as likely to cite mental health or emotional stress as a reason compared to cost-related concerns. ³⁵
Institutional Barriers	Higher education systems are largely built for students who enroll full-time right after high school. ³⁶ For adults returning to college, policies and structures such as complex re-enrollment processes and limited acceptance of prior earned credits create unnecessary hurdles. There is also the impact of institutional debt and satisfactory academic progress (SAP) requirements, which can prevent an adult from re-enrolling altogether. ^{37 38}
Limited Advising & Guidance	Many adult learners report feeling invisible in academic advising systems designed primarily for traditional-age students. They often receive little proactive guidance on transfer credits, degree pathways, or financial aid renewals. Advisors themselves may lack training to support adult learners. ³⁹
Time & Scheduling Constraints	Adult learners balance multiple responsibilities, including work, parenting, caregiving, and other personal commitments, which leaves little time for school. Rigid academic schedules, such as 16-week semesters and classes held during the workday, make participation difficult. Even when motivated, adults may have to delay or drop courses due to unpredictable work shifts or family needs. ⁴⁰

Existing Policies & Programs Focused on Adult Learners

Across the country, states, institutions, and organizations have developed programs and policies to support adult learners in pursuing a wide variety of postsecondary opportunities. The table below highlights select programs and policies supporting adult learners nationwide, offering a snapshot of current efforts to make postsecondary education more accessible and responsive to their needs.

Program Type	Description	Barriers Addressed
Affordability Programs	Financial aid for adult learners, including renewable grants, tuition-free college initiatives, or debt forgiveness programs that allow re-enrollment	High tuition costs, limited eligibility for financial aid, and institutional debt that may prevent re-enrollment
	Kansas Adult Learner Grant Michigan Reconnect Ohio College Comeback Compact	
Basic Needs Support	Wraparound services such as childcare, food, housing, and transportation that help adults stay enrolled and persist in college	Childcare costs, food insecurity, housing instability, and transportation
	California AB 132 - Basic Needs Centers Oregon Student Child Care Grant	
Adult Education & On-Ramp Supports	Programs that provide foundational education (GED/HiSET, ESL, adult basic education) and re-engagement pathways for adults with some college but no degree	Lack of a high school credential, language and literacy challenges, and limited advising or outreach
	Alabama Adult Education New Hampshire Adult Education Skill UP Mississippi	
Credit for Prior Learning & Flexible Pathways	Policies and practices that recognize adults' prior work, military, or life experience for academic credit, along with competency-based education and streamlined transfer pathways	Wasted time and money from repeating coursework, unclear transfer processes, and a longer time to degree
	Ivy Tech Community College National Louis University University of Memphis	
Workforce & Employer-Based Programs	Programs that connect adult learners to in-demand careers through employer partnerships, apprenticeships, and tuition benefits	High training costs, misalignment between education and workforce pathways, and the challenge of balancing employment with education
	Missouri Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant Ohio TechCred Wyoming Works	

Program Spotlights: Engaging & Supporting Adult Learners

Initiatives like Tennessee Reconnect, California Reconnect Initiative, and SparkPoint Centers at Bay Area Community Colleges show what it looks like when systems intentionally adapt to the needs of adult learners. They also showcase the national shift toward building adult-focused systems that meet learners where they are and help them persist to completion.



Tennessee Reconnect

Established in 2018, [Tennessee Reconnect](#) is an initiative designed to help more adults return to higher education, acquire new skills, advance in the workplace, and fulfill their lifelong dream of completing a degree or credential. Through the program, eligible adults can attend a community college or technical college for up to two years tuition-free.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

- Tennessee Reconnect Grant
- Reconnect Navigators (success coaches)

IMPACT

In the first semester of Reconnect, adult enrollment at community colleges increased 18% over the prior year.⁴¹ Students who worked with a Navigate Reconnect coach (“Reconnectors”) exhibited significantly higher persistence rates compared to other nontraditional students. For example, 55% of Reconnectors who enrolled in community colleges were still enrolled or had attained a credential two years later, compared to just 44% of other nontraditional students.⁴²



California Reconnect Initiative

The [California Reconnect Program](#) is designed to re-engage adults with some college education but no credential (SCNC) and support them through to completion. Launched in 2023 as part of the state’s adult learner attainment strategy, the program provides targeted outreach, financial incentives, and dedicated advising for returning students.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

- Intentional Outreach
- Student Success Coaches

IMPACT

In its first year, the California Reconnect Program served thousands of returning students across participating colleges and universities. Early findings from the Year 1 evaluation report indicated that the majority of participants valued the one-on-one support and the sense of belonging that the program cultivated. Since its launch, the program has reached more than 14,000 former students and achieved a 13% reenrollment rate (over six times the national average), demonstrating the program’s strong potential to reengage adult learners at scale. Many adult learners who participated in this program shared that without the outreach and coaching provided by the Reconnect program, they would not have considered returning to college.⁴³



SparkPoint Hubs at Community Colleges

SparkPoint Centers, an initiative of United Way Bay Area, were created to help low-income individuals and families achieve long-term financial stability and academic success. The program integrates financial, career, and academic support in a coordinated hub. Various of these hubs are located within community colleges. The goal is to reduce financial stress, increase persistence, and help students build pathways to prosperity.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

- Financial Coaching
- Basic Needs Assistance
- Career and Academic Support
- Campus and Community Partnerships

IMPACT

SparkPoint operates in 9 Bay Area community colleges. Across these campuses, SparkPoint students' persistence rates exceeded the college-wide average by 11% - 38%:

- Laney College: 95% persistence (vs. 57% college-wide)
- Contra Costa College: 80% (vs. 62%)
- College of San Mateo: 99% (vs. 88%)
- Cañada College: 79% (vs. 58%)
- College of Marin: 60% (vs. 49%)

Students describe SparkPoint as a “community of people on campus who care.” They credit the initiative’s financial coaching and wraparound support for helping them persist by connecting them to financial, academic, and basic needs support.⁴⁴

Note on Emerging Federal Shifts

While many promising programs and policies exist across the country to support adult learners, it is important to recognize how federal policy shifts under the current administration may affect their availability. For example, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program provides campus-based child care assistance for low-income student parents. In August 2025, the U.S. Department of Education discontinued CCAMPIS grants for certain colleges, and the administration’s proposed FY26 budget would eliminate program funding entirely.⁴⁵ Policymakers, practitioners, and advocates should monitor these developments closely and strengthen state and institutional strategies to sustain adult learner supports if federal investment declines.

Policy Recommendations

The recommendations we offer build on what we learned through our survey of existing programs and policies and reflect themes shared in multiple reports. They constitute practical steps that states and institutions can take to help adult learners start, return to, and complete postsecondary education.

Expand access to financial aid

Increase funding and flexibility in aid programs to ensure adult learners can afford college.

Promote awareness and outreach

Create campaigns and incentives to encourage potential adult learners to re/enroll and hire enrollment navigators to facilitate re/enrollment.^{46 47 48}

Reform Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policies

Reform SAP policies to better align with student needs, ensuring that communication about SAP is clear, the appeals process is straightforward, and that funding is not contingent on prior SAP status.^{49 50}

Award credit for prior learning (CPL)

Assess and award credit for prior learning. Evidence suggests that CPL can enhance completion rates and boost confidence among adult students. CPL programs can also reduce the number of hours required to complete a credential.^{51 52}

Strengthen credit transfer pathways

Facilitate coordination among institutions to ensure that adult learners returning to college can transfer credits with minimal loss.^{53 54}

Increase course flexibility

Offer more evening, weekend, and online classes to enable learners to balance their school commitments with family and career responsibilities.^{55 56}

Invest in student support services

Establish comprehensive case management systems to ensure adult learners receive the academic and non-academic support they need to persist.^{57 58}

Help students access and afford their basic needs

Hire benefits navigators to assist students in accessing federal, state, and local public benefits programs, and require all faculty and staff to undergo training on basic needs. Offer resources to students, such as on-campus food pantries, housing subsidies for low-income students, emergency grant aid, and child care subsidies.⁵⁹



State Recommendation



Higher Ed Recommendation

Conclusion

Adult learners are central to the future of California and the nation. They represent millions of individuals with the drive to continue their education, but often face systems that are not built with them in mind. The research is clear: when adult learners earn degrees, their families, communities, and the broader economy thrive. Adults who return to school vote more, volunteer more, and lead healthier, more stable lives. By 2031, 72% of jobs in the United States are expected to require postsecondary education or training.⁶⁰ To meet the workforce demands of the next decade and ensure inclusive growth, California must invest in flexible, affordable, and supportive systems that make college possible for every adult ready to return to school. Building an adult-ready ecosystem is not just about credentials, it's about creating pathways to lifelong opportunity, community well-being, and shared prosperity.

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