



Back to College:

California's 4 Million Adults with Some College But No Degree

2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Back to College is a two-part report series that illuminates the millions of Californians who stopped out of college before completing their degree and now pay the price through diminished earnings and limited economic and social mobility. This executive summary provides key findings from the initial report describing the population and the barriers they face when returning to college, as well as summarizes the second report of policy recommendations to empower these adults to return to college, graduate, and thrive in California's innovation economy.

Introduction

A looming deficit of more than two million workers with degrees or certificates by 2025 threatens California's ability to meet its economic needs. As California attempts to close this projected gap, policymakers must consider adults to be a critical part of the solution. Four million adults between 25 and 64 in California left college without a degree, representing a key opportunity for closing the attainment gap. Facing limited opportunities for economic and social mobility—nearly 70% earn less than \$50,000 per year—they may be especially motivated to take advantage of pathways to a degree.

All Californians would benefit if more adults with some college but no degree move across the finish line. A pathway to degree completion could give these adults a boost to their individual and familial prosperity, sustain the state's innovation economy by meeting workforce demands, and form civically engaged, cohesive communities.

Supporting this population's return to college and through degree completion will also contribute to balancing California's severe income inequality; higher rates of poor students and students of color do not complete college in their first try due to structural and institutional barriers such as affordability and inadequate student supports.

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Who Are California's Adults with Some College But No Degree?

77% are employed, primarily full-time



40% have dependent children



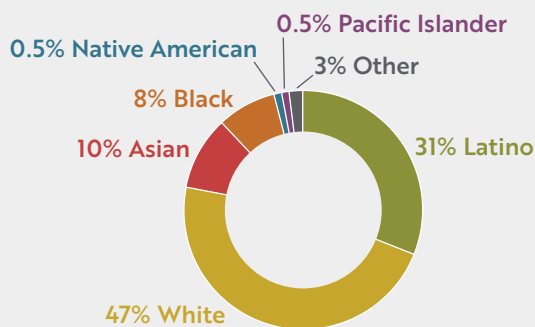
Most work in low-paying occupations

Top Occupations for California Adults (25-64) with Some College But No Degree

Women	Men
Office & Admin Support (30%)	Sales (12%)
Sales (12%)	Management (11%)
Personal Care & Service (9%)	Construction & Extraction (10%)
Management (9%)	Transport & Material Moving (10%)
Health Care Support (5%)	Office & Admin Support (10%)

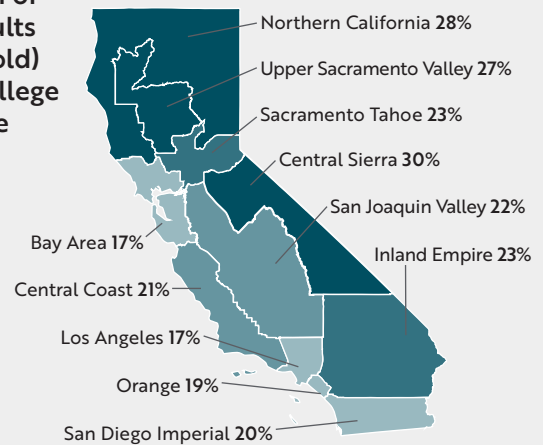
53% are people of color

California Adults (25-64 years old) with Some College But No Degree by Race



Adults with some college but no degree live throughout the state

Concentration of California Adults (25-64 years old) with Some College But No Degree By Region



Sources: California Competes' calculations of American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) 2016 five-year estimate data

What Barriers Do They Face When Returning to College?

- » **Limited financing options due to eligibility and availability restrictions.** Federal Pell Grants are only available for up to 12 semesters over one's lifetime and do not extend to short-term certificate programs, which often cater to working adults. Similarly, few Cal Grants are offered to students who are more than a year out from high school graduation, and these awards time out after four semesters of inactivity.
- » **Balancing school, work, and home.** The story of a full-time college student whose only obligation is to his or her studies is increasingly rare for most Californians, and even less relatable for adults contemplating re-enrollment.

Returning to college likely requires adjustments to current work schedules, childcare, and transportation.

- » **Structural barriers created by systems not designed for returning students.** California's higher education segments largely operate independently of one another, creating inefficiencies and information siloes for students and institutions. For example, California lacks a statewide common course numbering system or a statewide degree audit system, both of which could help returning adults understand how their previous educational histories translate to their new goals.

Policy Recommendations to Support Adults Returning to College

Because the barriers to degree completion for the adult population are varied, a systematic, multi-pronged approach is needed to significantly close the credential gap and meet workforce demand statewide. The time is right to enact policy recommendations that build on existing completion efforts in and outside of California. The recommendations outlined here are fiscally pragmatic, politically feasible, build upon existing initiatives, improve equity for higher education student populations, and are scalable to achieve true impact. They would allow more adults to go back to college and finish a credential, as well as prevent more students from leaving college without a degree in the first place.



Support adult student service needs

California should pilot a grant program for institutions to assess, consolidate, and streamline existing support services for adult students. Some interventions that the state should consider prioritizing through this program include more accessible childcare for student parents, flexible academic schedules, and tailored peer network communities. These services should be designed to complement existing completion efforts, like Guided Pathways, which is currently implemented on all 114 California community college campuses.



Connect training programs to degrees

The Employment Training Panel (ETP)—a statewide agency that provides funding for employee upskilling that leads to good paying, long-term jobs—rarely connects to certificate or degree completion. The state should pilot a short-term award program through ETP that funds upskilling through trainings that explicitly connect to postsecondary degrees in relevant high-demand, high-wage fields. Employer incentives to connect workforce development with degree completion in these fields would expand the availability of skilled and qualified workers for targeted fields.



Expand aid eligibility for adults

The state should expand eligibility of the transfer entitlement Cal Grant by eliminating the requirement that students be 28 or younger to qualify for a Transfer Entitlement Cal Grants and changing the residency requirement for these grants from time of high school graduation to time of transfer. These reforms could make more than 3,500 current students eligible for a transfer entitlement award, although thousands more may be incentivized to apply as eligibility requirements change. The reforms would also reduce the burden on the competitive grant program while other reforms are underway.



Reduce nominal barriers to re-entry

To attract students back to college, California should ease burdens on returning adults seeking to complete their degree by requiring community college districts and other public undergraduate institutions to temporarily waive or reduce administrative fees, penalties, and holds to maximize the probability of adult re-enrollment. For example, institutions could encourage consistent and steady academic progress (e.g., enrollment in and successful completion of a minimum number of credits for four consecutive terms) with the promise of waiving these nominal administrative and financial barriers.



Eliminate administrative hurdles to degree conferral

California should require all community colleges to develop an “opt-out” policy for degree conferral, automatically awarding students degrees when they are earned rather than requiring students to initiate and file an application for the degree to be awarded. This would ensure that students who have earned the credits for a degree or certificate are awarded that credential, and it would shift administrative burden of degree conferral from students to institutions themselves.



Conclusion

Adults with some college but no degree who are looking to improve their economic trajectory will eventually seek out higher education. However, it is up to the state, higher education segments, and individual campuses to support returning adults' ability to easily re-enroll, navigate the institution, and minimize cost. Implementation state- and systemwide must acknowledge the realities of the returning adult population, and their motivation for completing their degree should be met with a system eager to accept them back. Further, these policies cannot be adopted one-by-one or only at individual campuses to support the four million adults with some college at scale.

For more information on this population see [Back to College Part 1: California's Imperative to Re-Engage Adults](#). For more information on these policy recommendations—including a discussion of existing efforts in California to engage adults and cost estimates for the policy recommendations—please see [Back to College Part 2: A Policy Prescription to Support Adults Returning to College](#).