From Practice to Policy: How Institutions Accelerate Adult Completion and Fuel Prosperity

Key Takeaways

» Accelerated pathways shift the paradigm from a focus on improving students' college readiness to improving colleges' student readiness

» Employers and students could benefit from maximizing investments in college-based workforce training

» Increasing enrollment on-ramps, predictability, flexibility, and compressed term formats may increase the likelihood of completion for working students

» Incentivizing reciprocity of credit between colleges could increase completion for millions of swirling students

California needs more than 1 million more college graduates to close the degree gap,[1] grow the state's economy, and meet workforce demands. While efforts typically focus on the college-going rates of California's 430,000 high school graduates,[2] more than 12 million adults between the ages of 25 and 64 statewide lack a postsecondary credential and 4 million have some college and no degree.[3] Many of these adults are already in the workforce, making them a critical component of the state's strategy for economic growth.

Higher education offers a strong value proposition for these adult workers (who need career mobility) and their employers (who need skilled talent). Yet, as noted in Back to College: Part 1, enrolling in college is logistically challenging for many adults, given the need to manage the cost of attendance and to balance school with home and work. Employers, while recognizing the value of additional education and training, also face challenges in supporting workforce development, as they must balance

staffing and productivity. As the largest formal providers of education and training in the state of California, colleges and universities can implement solutions to enable both individuals and employers to succeed economically.
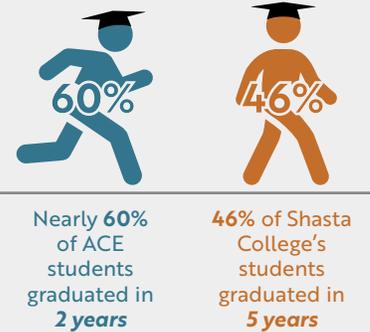
This brief, the second in a series highlighting promising institutional strategies, explores how the Accelerated College Education (ACE) program of Shasta College (Shasta) aims to help students—especially working adults over age 25—enroll in and complete a certificate or associate's degree within two years.[i] Drawing from interviews and public documents, this brief describes how Shasta leaders designed an alternative course schedule structure and program support model to reduce barriers adults face and increase the likelihood of completion. This brief also includes considerations for institutional and state policymakers as they invest to maximize student success and equitable economic growth.

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i. The ACE program also offers certificate programs not highlighted in this brief.

Improving Degree Completion at Shasta College

Whereas nationwide, 25 percent of adults age 25 to 64 had some college and no degree in 2014, that number was nearly 33 percent in Shasta's three-county service area.[i] To improve adult attainment regionally, Shasta leaders developed ACE. Since the program's launch in 2016, ACE leaders have focused on modifications to the traditional degree program structure, expanding enrollment on-ramps, adjusting course length, and using a case management support model.[ii] Between June 2016 and August 2019, ACE enrolled approximately 400 students in six cohorts. To date, ACE students typically have persistence and completion rates near 60 percent—these statistics are nearly the same as the persistence rates and higher than the five-year completion rates in Shasta's traditional programs (61 percent and 46 percent, respectively).[4]

Graduation Rates

60%

46%

Nearly **60%** of ACE students graduated in **2 years**

46% of Shasta College's students graduated in **5 years**

Student-Centered Structures Promote Access and Success

ACE was designed to reduce barriers related to enrolling in college and completing an associate's degree, especially for adults with some college and no degree.[iii] Below, we describe six elements of ACE that work to expand access and increase the likelihood that adult students graduate.

Increased Enrollment On-Ramps

Students typically have two enrollment on-ramps, or chances to enroll in college, each year, once in the fall and once in the spring. The limited number of on-ramps can discourage enrollment, especially among adults who are balancing work and home responsibilities. However, since ACE courses are on an eight-week schedule, resulting in two on-ramps each fall and spring term, students have two opportunities to (re)enroll each semester. This doubles the number of enrollment opportunities during fall and spring terms from two to four, which could significantly help returning students who need only a few courses to graduate.

Maximizing Past Experience

Adults without a postsecondary credential can be discouraged from enrolling in college when past education or work experience is not counted toward graduation requirements or is duplicative with coursework required to graduate. At intake, ACE counselor helps students develop an education plan that attempts to maximize their ability to apply credit for prior learning (CPL)[5] (e.g., from military, training or other work experience) and accelerate time to graduation.

Compressed Term Format

For many adult students, managing a full-time course load with academic, financial, familial, and work obligations during the traditional 17-week semester is untenable. ACE provides access to four associate's degree programs, one certificate program, and one General Education pathway that can be applied to a non-ACE associate's degree program in a compressed term format with eight-week-long courses. As with typical summer school offerings, students can take up to two courses at a time during each eight-week period. This allows students to take up to four courses per term, but with different pacing (e.g., taking two rather than four classes at a time).

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i.   For more information, see *A Stronger Nation through Higher Education* (2014): https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/a-stronger-nation-through-higher-education-2014.pdf

ii. ACE holds two 8-week terms within the 17-week semester, separated by one week off.

iii. This brief does not attempt to evaluate the ACE program or its work.

Case Management Approach

Access to academic and student affairs professionals is often consequential for student success. Yet historically, services are siloed and availability is limited for older and working students, due to near-recession-level staffing and traditional business hours of operation. ACE staff includes a part-time counselor and a full-time student success facilitator, who serve as a "one stop shop" for students, helping them manage and navigate academic and non-academic issues related to enrollment and course selection, prepare for and set up appointments, navigate financial aid, and identify other necessary services. These staff are available in person, via telephone, and through email until 6 p.m. most days—an hour after the campus is closed.

Predictable Course Offerings

Adult students struggle to accumulate credits needed to graduate when enrollment demand exceeds capacity and when school, home, and work obligations collide.[6] ACE staff works with departments to plan the curriculum two years out for associate's degree-seeking students and providing them with the date and time of each course needed to graduate when they enroll. This predictability allows students to make accommodations that balance school with other responsibilities (e.g., work and childcare). Instructors and administrators also benefit, since they can better forecast enrollment for each course and the number of sections needed, ensuring course capacity meets enrollment demand.

Flexible Course Delivery

Shasta is the only community college in a 10,000-square-mile region, making consistent on-campus attendance impractical for many students[i]. ACE's flexible course delivery allows students to participate in classes face-to-face and virtually, with real-time and asynchronous online learning opportunities.

Table 1: Review of Traditional and Accelerated Models

ACE was structured to meet the needs of adult students, including those new to higher education or with some college and no degree. This table highlights how ACE is both similar to and different from traditional associate's degree programs.

	Traditional Program	ACE Program
Semester term length	17 weeks	17 weeks
Course length	17 weeks	8 weeks
Number of courses taken simultaneously per semester	Four	Two
Maximum number of courses completed per semester	Four	Four
Available pathways*	100+	6
Typical delivery format	Face-to-face	Online or hybrid
Average student-counselor ratio	1,000:1	200:1
Academic year structure	Fall and spring terms	Fall, spring, and summer terms
Average time to degree completion	More than 2 years	2 years

* Shasta College offers more than 100 certificate and degree programs. ACE offers four associate's degree programs, one certificate program, and one General Education pathway (to be applied to a non-ACE program), noted here: http://www.shastacollege.edu/Academic%20Affairs/ACE/Pages/ACE-Class-Schedules-and-Time-Commitment.aspx

Note: Information retrieved from Shasta College's website. This comparison table is simplified for illustrative purposes. For details about Shasta College programs of study and those offered through ACE, please see the college website or contact campus personnel.

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i.   Retrieved from Shasta College website, http://www.shastacollege.edu/Marketing/Pages/78.aspx

Improving Adult Attainment Requires New Models

Ensuring adults without a credential have a realistic chance at completing a credential requires new models of higher education. While current college reforms show promising results,[7] evidence suggests that no one intervention will address all the barriers students face. As colleges continue to design and implement reforms that address adult credential attainment, at least three recommendations emerge from ACE that may help institutions and state policymakers.

Maximize Opportunities for Acceleration

The legislature, colleges, and universities have taken steps to help students complete certificates and degrees faster while maintaining quality (e.g., accepting dual enrollment or AP credit and developing the associate's degree for transfer). With few exceptions, most credit acceleration strategies are designed for students who matriculate to college immediately after high school, rather than adults 25 years and older.

Given early results from other contexts,[8] state, segment, and institutional leaders should maximize implementation of the compressed term format as an acceleration tool for California students, especially returning adults. According to ACE program staff, faculty, and students, the compressed term format works well for individuals with relatively strong time management and writing skills. However, given California's diverse English language, developmental, and other needs, scale may require co-requisite support, such as the model used for AB 705 implementation.[9]

Leverage Employers as Partners in Degree Completion

There are opportunity costs to individuals and their employers when working adults enroll in certificate or degree programs. For the millions of working California adults living in or near poverty,[10] the promise of higher future wages from education or training should significantly outweigh the immediate financial and opportunity costs of enrolling in a credential program. Employers benefit when workers upskill—allowing employers to balance staffing and productivity with changing industry contexts— particularly when supports exist that maximize these benefits.

State agencies and employers can use existing annual investments through college-focused workforce training support (e.g., the Cal Grant C program, employer-based tuition remission, and the Community College ETP Collaborative)

to support attainment. Yet the extent to which students and employers are aware of and able to maximize these opportunities is unknown. Students and staff described heightened interest in the ACE program when outreach was conducted in partnership with employers. As such, workforce development and credential completion efforts should be aligned with existing state and local initiatives and incentives to maximize outcomes and efficiencies.

Acknowledge Students' Experience and Mobility

A significant number of California's students attend more than one institution before earning their first credential.[11] While this is demonstrative of California's widespread commitment to college access, the lack of curricular and policy coordination across institutions and segments contributes to the state's disproportionately large percentage of adults with some college but no degree.[12]

To accelerate completion for students who attend more than one institution, the state must incentivize reciprocity of credit earned across public colleges and universities. While ACE staff tries to help students apply prior credit and knowledge to degree plans during intake, scaling this model would require nontrivial personnel adjustments (e.g., more advisors or counselors) and more state guidance. A more student-centered approach would incentivize cross-segment application of credit accumulated to credentials of value, ideally through a higher education coordinating entity.

Increasing Adult Attainment Could Close California's Gaps

To maintain economic leadership, California policymakers and institutions must continue to collaborate on ways to promote attainment by adults at the state and segment levels, not just institution by institution. Local approaches are needed but can unintentionally reinforce geographic and other inequities. More comprehensive and systemic state-level coordination can ensure that individuals who want to earn credentials and increase their long-term wages are able to do so. Addressing the barriers adults face will also provide California employers with a better trained workforce that can drive economic growth. Intentionally designing education programs—like ACE—policies, and pathways so that individuals, regardless of age and location, have a realistic opportunity to complete in a timely manner would elevate California as a national leader in student success and equitable economic prosperity.

Notes

1. Public Policy Institute of California. (October 2015). *Will California run out of college graduates?* Retrieved from https://www.ppic.org/publication/will-california-run-out-of-college-graduates/

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3. California Competes. (2018). *Back to college: Part 1*. Retrieved from http://californiacompetes.org/assets/general-files/CACompetes_Back-to-College-Part-One.pdf

4. California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (2019). *Management information systems data mart: Outcomes—Student success scorecard metrics (persistence and completion rates for 2011–12 cohort by 2016–17)*. Retrieved from https://datamart.cccco.edu/DataMart.aspx

5. Klein-Collins, R., and Hudson, S. (2017). *What happens when learning counts?* Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. Retrieved from https://www.cael.org/adult-learning/publication/when-learning-counts?hsCtaTracking=d8da4991-ed08-4c8e-9a42-839f4e4a876d%7C68b75780-3859-44a3-bacc-a46088c46f9f

6. California State University. (2019). *Impacted undergraduate majors and campuses, 2020–21*. Retrieved from https://www2.calstate.edu/attend/degrees-certificates-credentials/Pages/impacted-degrees.aspx

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8. Odessa College. (2019). *Access and affordability:* Retrieved from https://www.odessa.edu/RoadtoAspen/Resources/AspenPDF/Odessa-College-Collateral-WEB.pdf

9. Mejia, M. C., Rodriguez, O., and Johnson, H. (2019). *What happens when colleges broaden access to transfer-level courses: Evidence from California's community colleges*. Public Policy Institute of California. Retrieved from https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/what-happens-when-colleges-broaden-access-to-transfer-level-courses-evidence-from-californias-community-colleges.pdf

10. Bohn, S., Danielson, C., and Thorman, T. (2019). *The working poor in California*. Public Policy Institute of California. Retrieved from https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-working-poor-in-california/

11. Governor's Office of Planning and Research. (2019). *The master plan for higher education in California and state workforce needs a review*. Retrieved from http://opr.ca.gov/docs/20190808-Master_Plan_Report.pdf

12. Shapiro, D., Ryu, M., Huie, F., and Liu, Q. (2019). *Some college, no degree: A 2019 snapshot for the nation and 50 states*, signature report no. 17. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Retrieved from https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND_Report_2019.pdf