



Back to College

Part Two:

*A Policy Prescription to Support
Adults Returning to College*



CALIFORNIA COMPETES
HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A STRONG ECONOMY

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Back to College is a two-part report series that illuminates the millions of Californians who left college before completing their degree and now pay the price through diminished earnings and limited economic and social mobility. Part One assesses this population of four million California adults aged 25-64 and identifies the personal obstacles and systemic barriers they face upon returning to college to complete their degree. This report, Part Two, outlines pragmatic recommendations policymakers should incorporate to empower these adults to return to college, graduate, and thrive in California’s innovation economy.

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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.¹ 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. But the standard pathways to a college degree are not designed for these adults. More than three quarters of them are working, and a large share (40 percent) have dependent children.² A pathway to a degree that works for this adult population could provide a boost to the individual and familial prosperity of these newly minted graduates, 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 the degree completion pathway 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. These include unaffordability, opaque systems, and a lack of institutional supports. (See [Back to College Part 1](#) for more detail.)

Colleges and universities throughout California have instituted local efforts to help adults overcome personal, familial, financial, and institutional barriers to degree completion; however, those efforts are relatively limited in scope. Because 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 identify actionable policy recommendations that build on existing adult completion efforts in and outside of California.

The content that follows outlines five timely recommendations to support adults through degree



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completion in California. Although most are applicable to both two- and four-year colleges, some are tailored specifically to the California Community Colleges, given its outsized role educating adults and connecting them to the workforce.

The policy 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.

Policy Recommendations

To support adults to return to and complete college, policymakers should consider and enact these policy changes.

1. Provide direct institutional funding to ensure adult students' academic and social needs are addressed in alignment with existing completion initiatives

As recent high school graduates enter the higher education system, most are met with an experience and a system of supports designed for them. Class and assignment schedules, college supports, and social services cater to students who are younger and less likely to have familial responsibilities. Adults entering this system must learn to navigate it while managing significant additional responsibilities that are unique to their circumstances, such as dependent care and balancing work and school schedules.

Considerations for returning adults are missing from current reforms.

Reforms to address college completion and the gap between the needs of California's workforce and the skills of California's college graduates have been initiated in recent years. The California Community Colleges Guided Pathways Award Program, for example, provides students with clear curricular pathways to employment and higher education alongside complementary integrated supports.³ The Strong Workforce Program, also within the community college system, invests in the creation of more middle-skilled workers through pathways in career and technical education. But even these programs and others like it do not consistently feature the kind of flexibility and availability in course-scheduling, advising, tutoring, childcare, and transportation needed for adults already in the workforce but without a college degree.

Although California has a solid foundation for providing services to adult students—more than 80 percent of California's public higher education institutions have a

campus child care center⁴—students themselves will be the first to report a lack of available spots within such programs, which don't always offer the needed flexibility (e.g., early opening to accommodate work or late hours for evening courses). Adult-centric student services are either missing or are disjointed from the programs that connect students with the skills and credentials they need to succeed.⁵ A more systemic approach would center these services around today's students, making them easily navigable and available to fit the needs of a highly diverse group.

Adults Would Benefit from Stronger Supports to Ensure Degree Completion

- » Course scheduling flexibility
- » Academic advising contextualized for their experiences
- » Cohort-based tutoring and remediation
- » Childcare, transportation, and connections to social services compatible with academic participation

Utilizing State & Federal Funds To Support Adult Students

Several state and federal programs provide funds to support high-need student groups. Policymakers should consider whether the following programs could be leveraged to finance student services for adults.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS



Temporary Aid for Needy Families

States can leverage TANF dollars to support childcare and early education for low-income families, expanding college accessibility options for adults with children.



Housing and Urban Development Grants

Institutions and local agencies can use housing vouchers and rental assistance programs to connect adult students to affordable housing.



Strengthening Working Families Initiative

Fourteen cities across the U.S. received grants to implement wrap-around services like childcare and job placement for low-income college students through 2021.



Childcare Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program

Institutions can apply for funding from the U.S. Department of Education to expand campus-based childcare services.

STATE PROGRAMS



CA Strong Workforce Program

Institutions may be able to leverage SWP dollars to develop academic programs tailored to working adults.



CA Adult Education Block Grant

Institutions may be able to leverage AEBG dollars to support workforce reentry, career and technical education, and job and apprenticeship training for adult students.

Policy Recommendation #1:

California should pilot a grant program for colleges and universities to assess, consolidate, and streamline existing support services for adult students.

Applicant colleges should be required to provide details of planned academic and non-academic supports, as well as staffing and the extent to which such services are adopted and utilized by returning adults. 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.

Incentivizing colleges to combine the efforts of current reforms and adult student-centered improvements would help institutions use their program-specific apportionments more efficiently and strategically. Colleges should also be incentivized to collaborate by district or region. This would help increase the kind of services offered to students. For example, proximate colleges could consider jointly establishing extended childcare programs with districtwide capacity and extended-hour programming.

All two- and four-year public institutions should be eligible, with attention to colleges with significant opportunity for adult re-entry and completion. If colleges were eligible for grants for between \$1 and \$3 million in targeted funds per year and an estimated 30 to 40 colleges participated annually, the pilot would cost the state approximately \$120 million per year.

2. Strengthen connections between existing employer-led worker training programs and degree and certificate programs

California currently invests approximately \$200 million to subsidize or reimburse employer training of new and incumbent workers through the Employment Training Panel (ETP). ETP funding is designed to foster job creation and the retention of workers in secure, full-time employment in targeted industries, and could be further leveraged to help returning adults earn college credentials.

Existing programs could extend benefits to returning adults.

The Employment Training Panel (ETP), established in 1982, is a statewide business-labor training and economic development agency that provides funding for employee upskilling through training that leads to good paying, long-term jobs.⁶ The ETP's Core Funding Program primarily funds retraining of employed workers in companies, targeting those threatened by out-of-state competition, placing special emphasis on training for small businesses with fewer than 100 employees in California. The employer determines the training courses, trainers, and types of training that best meet their business needs.

Unfortunately, these investments rarely connect to or incentivize certificate or degree completion. By statute, ETP funding typically does not subsidize worker training funding to postsecondary programs; however, exceptions can be made. Incentivizing employers to connect workforce development with degree completion in these fields would expand the availability of skilled and qualified workers for targeted fields.

Policy Recommendation #2:

The state should pilot a short-term award program through ETP that funds upskilling, especially for adults with some college but no degree, through trainings that explicitly connect to postsecondary degrees in relevant high-demand, high-wage fields.

This approach is consistent with ETP's existing function and mission: job creation and worker retention. ETP already focuses on priority industries, high unemployment areas, and the needs of California's workforce.

The state invests approximately \$1,700 per full-time equivalent community college student.⁷ By contrast, according to the 2016-2017 ETP Annual Report, current investment for worker training incentives stands at \$900 per trainee—a potentially more cost-effective investment for the state that could result in the end goal for businesses (upskilling) and benefit workers and the state (a college credential). Supporting 10,000 adults to earn new credentials would require an investment of less than \$10 million. An implementation period of at least five years would allow enough time to realize credential completion. A pilot could also provide the state with an opportunity to review ETP administrative and funding processes, and whether modifications could help more efficiently connect returning adults to education and employment in good-paying, high-demand fields.

Leveraging Existing Initiatives

A pilot of this kind would also align with other initiatives relevant to the community college system (including the Adult Education Block Grant, Career Pathways Trust, and the Strong Workforce Program, each of which connect education with the needs of the workforce), as well as the California Community College student-centered funding formula, which allocates funding to institutions based on both enrollment and completion numbers. It also complements the California State University's Graduation Initiative 2025, which seeks to mitigate common barriers to degree completion. While those initiatives focus on current students, the pilot with ETP would focus on adult workers.

Current Efforts to Re-Engage Adults

The emerging efforts described below are areas of promise for adults with some college but no degree. When combined with the policies recommended in this report, California is poised to maximize returning adults' contribution to the state's innovation economy.



California Adult Promise Program

In 2016, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, with support from the Lumina Foundation, began the Adult Promise Program to assess the feasibility of creating statewide financial aid programs for adult students. In November 2018, California was announced as a participant in the second cohort. The state will first assess the availability of supports for adults with some college and recommend systemic changes. With a long-term goal to improve affordability for adults, this effort has the potential to spearhead whole scale reforms for returning adults.



Credit for Prior Learning

Returning adults often bring with them a wealth of experience that can be quantified in academic course credit when they return to college, an effort called Credit for Prior Learning (CPL). Because faculty have authority over curriculum, individual colleges historically have set their own CPL policies. However, this is changing due to the passage of AB 1786 (2018), which requires the California Community College to develop a plan to expand CPL policies for veterans into a segmentwide initiative for all students. A pilot implementation is anticipated for Fall 2019.

CPL can be a significant incentive for adults to return to school, because it can reduce time to degree and it sends a message to adults that their experiences have value in the formal education setting. Adult students who take advantage of CPL accumulate credits faster and have higher completion rates.⁸ If CPL is consistently implemented across community colleges, incorporated into existing initiatives like Guided Pathways, and coupled with student-friendly outreach about the benefits, this initiative could lead to better completion rates.



Online Community College

In 2018, the 115th community college, the California Online Community College was established to provide adults who want additional education and training with a reliable, low-cost, and logistically feasible college option. The online campus has been designed to initially offer certificates in three high-demand fields and may eventually provide accredited sub-baccalaureate programs of study. Alongside the existing Online Education Initiative (OEI)⁹ at the California Community Colleges, the new college provides a comprehensive set of options for adults that need an online program.



Community College Baccalaureate Pilot Program

The state approved the Baccalaureate Degree Pilot Program with the passage of SB 850 (2014). This bill authorized the community colleges, in consultation with the CSU and UC systems, to develop bachelor's degree programs with 15 community college districts to help address the workforce and degree gap. The bill required that bachelor's degree programs start by the 2017-2018 academic year and that students complete these credentials within six years.

Recently, SB 1406 (2018) passed to extend the timeline of the Baccalaureate Degree Pilot Program, allowing students to enroll in these programs until 2023. This has the potential to vastly expand adult opportunities to earn degrees—particularly those with limited access to four-year colleges.



Regional Reverse Transfer Efforts

Despite the growing prevalence of Associate Degree for Transfer in California, many students transfer from a community college to a four-year institution without being awarded an associate's degree. If these students leave the four-year college before completing a bachelor's degree, they are left without any credential. "Reverse transfer" initiatives identify and awards these former students associate's degrees retroactively, allowing them to reap the benefits associated with attainment. Regional initiatives are emerging and could make a difference in places with large shares of residents with some college but no degree. Los Angeles (through a program led by LA Compact and Cal State Northridge) and Shasta County (through a program led by North State Together and Shasta College), were both designated as Talent Hubs by the Lumina and Kresge Foundations and are efforts to watch around reverse transfer.



Accelerated Cohort Programs

Promising college-led efforts to expedite completion for working adults are also gaining traction. Shasta College, for example, serves a region where one in three adults have some college but no degree. The college's Accelerated College Education (ACE) program helps working adults attend full-time and earn an associate's degree within two years. The program is comprised of eight-week courses in pre-selected pathways relevant to local demand, hybrid courses, a case management approach, and a peer support network. This high-touch model has resulted in stronger retention and completion rates for ACE students compared to the college's general student population. A similar program, the Working Student Program, was recently initiated at City College of San Francisco. It combines academic modifications for working adults, case management, and referrals for support services as such childcare and social service benefits.



Financial Aid

Policy changes to consolidate the Cal Grant program and efforts to change the calculation of student financial need are currently under consideration. If pursued, these changes will require several years for full implementation but will likely have significant impacts on adult students' ability to access financial aid. For example, young adults not eligible for a Cal Grant entitlement grant must compete for the limited number of competitive grants available each year.¹⁰ Consolidation into a unified Cal Grant program, rather than one with two applicant pools and three components, would simplify eligibility and expand adults' opportunity for financial aid receipt.

A new model for determining financial need would also improve benefits for adult students. The current Cal Grant system awards financial aid based on the cost of tuition and fees at California colleges. However, increasingly students struggle to afford the full cost of attendance including transportation, housing, and food. Adults, who often face additional financial burdens, are no different. A financial aid model that is based on a student's expected family contribution takes personal needs and ability-to-pay into account. This would likely significantly increase the amount of aid adults received from the state.



"Earn and Learn" Models

Earn and Learn models,¹¹ which combine paid, applied workplace learning with educational skill and competency development, are increasingly popular. They support pathways toward a degree while working but have traditionally been limited in number and to vocational fields. AB2105 (2016) and AB235 (2018) provide an opportunity to explore application of the apprenticeship model to the health care industry and to increase the number of pre-apprenticeships.

Expanding the number and availability of "earn and learn" programs can help returning adults complete meaningful postsecondary credentials. Efforts to expand these models have great promise and can inform the administration, logistics, and cost of more large-scale initiatives that can simultaneously meet workforce demand and worker education needs throughout California.



Longitudinal Education Data System

California lacks a comprehensive P-20 longitudinal data system to inform the education process for all students, including adults. Such a system would include data on individuals from pre-kindergarten through elementary, secondary, postsecondary education, and into the workforce. Governor-Elect Newsom and members of the state legislature have indicated a strong interest in developing such a system for California in 2019. A statewide data system would allow for the historical tracking of courses, credits, test results, and ongoing degree or certificate progress. It would also help institutions reconcile technical issues that prevent effective use of data, including statewide student identification and common course numbering. Further, a reliable and comprehensive longitudinal data system would help ensure that investments such as expanded free community college and incumbent worker training are well informed.

3. Expand the availability of financial aid for adults transferring from a two- to a four-year college

Financing college is a significant concern for students and families in California, regardless of age. While the state provides more than \$2.5 billion in financial aid annually, returning adults have limited access to many of these resources (See [Back to College Part 1](#) for more detail). California policymakers are already considering fundamental reform to the Cal Grant Program that may take several years to implement. In the meantime, the state could make substantial progress toward supporting those with some college but no degree by implementing smaller affordability reforms.

Key eligibility changes could make Cal Grants more available for transfer students.

As of 2017-18, adults 25 years and older received fewer than 2% of transfer entitlement Cal Grants, awards that support transfer directly from a two- to a four-year college.¹² The eligibility requirements for a transfer award are outdated, de-prioritizing the needs of adults. Students over the age of 28 and those who were not state residents at high school graduation (if after 2000) or on their 18th birthday (if before 2000) are not eligible for a transfer award—even if they meet all other academic and income requirements and are residents at the time they complete a two-year degree.

Students older than 28 and those who do not meet the requirements for an entitlement grant may compete for a fixed number of awards. California law allows up to 25,750 competitive awards annually.

Policy Recommendation #3:

The state should expand eligibility to 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 or 18th birthday to time of transfer.

These reforms could make more than 3,500 current students newly eligible for a transfer entitlement award, although thousands more may be incentivized to apply for financial



aid as eligibility requirements change.¹³ The reforms would also reduce the burden on the competitive grant program while other reforms are underway.

This policy shift would require an investment of at least \$200 million depending on the number of students awarded new and continuing grants.

4. Reduce administrative and financial barriers that prevent adults from returning to college

Too many adults leave college before completing a credential due to various personal, academic, financial, and administrative issues. Perceptions of cost and reconciling administrative holds, fees, and penalties can discourage students, including adults seeking a return to college.¹⁴ Administrative burdens—which colleges have the authority to reduce or eliminate on their own—should not be one of the barriers that adults need to overcome to re-enroll in college.

Nominal changes to institutional policies could yield large returns.

Alleviating some immediate financial barriers to re-enrollment, through fee deferral or forgiveness programs, provides time for students to make progress on degree or certificate completion before fulfilling their financial obligation. Wayne State University, for example, allows students who make consistent, measurable progress toward their degree to have their fees—no more than \$1,500—reduced over three years through a program called Warrior Way Back.¹⁵

Policy Recommendation #4:

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 colleges to develop policies that temporarily waive or reduce administrative fees, penalties, and holds to maximize the probability of adult re-enrollment.

For example, colleges could determine that consistent and steady academic progress (e.g., enrollment in and successful completion of a minimum number of credits for four consecutive terms) would result in waiving these nominal administrative and financial barriers.

Implementation of such a policy would require financial resources to identify and recruit eligible students. Given the demographic composition of adults with some college and no degree, where possible, it would be worthwhile to prioritize returning students that are 25 years of age or more, have fewer



than 20 units to complete, have dependents, seek credentials in high-demand fields, and/or have been out of school for four or more consecutive terms.

Colleges and the state have already invested in these students who have left school without a degree. They are unlikely to recoup any of it without those students returning and making meaningful progress to completion. Although an investment in identifying and communicating the opportunity to these students would require upfront costs, they would likely be marginal compared to the return on investment institutions and the state would see from higher degree completion.

5. Unburden current students from administrative hurdles to degree conferral

Colleges largely task students with managing their own progress towards a degree. While seemingly straightforward, this task is especially burdensome for the large share of California's college students who attend more than one institution. They must negotiate varied and locally-determined course management systems, course pathways, and degree conferral policies, often resulting in over-accumulation of credits and fatigue, even for students very close to completing a credential. For adults returning to college after a gap, applying for a degree can be especially tedious and opaque, given that procedures may have changed over time.

A shift in degree conferral procedures would reduce the likelihood that future students join the "some college, no degree" population.

Recent policy changes in the community college system demonstrate a movement toward easier degree conferral. For example, established in 2010, the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) program allows students to earn and fully transfer an associate's degree to a four-year institution. They are guaranteed an opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree in no more than an additional 60 semester units or 90 quarter units.¹⁶ Despite easing degree conferral, however, ADT remains limited to a select number of degree pathways.

Further, the new student-centered funding formula for the community college system includes funding for degree completion, in addition to enrollment. Therefore, community colleges could receive additional funding if they adopt streamlined policies that would confer earned awards more systematically. Despite this, California's community colleges largely use an "opt-in" policy for degree awards, requiring students to initiate and file an application for the degree to be awarded. A small number of community colleges have already shifted the burden away from students to an "opt-out" graduation policy, where colleges automatically notify students that the degree has been completed and will be conferred unless students respond that they do not want the degree.¹⁷

Policy Recommendation #5:

California should require all community colleges to develop an "opt-out" policy for degree conferral.

This policy would ensure that students who complete degree requirements are more expeditiously conferred earned degrees. Implementation should include notifying students of their earliest degree conferral and any associated student benefit changes (e.g., financial aid, housing, and healthcare).

In sum, the administrative responsibility for conferral of an award would shift from being primarily on students to being primarily on the institutions themselves. Community colleges would benefit from an "opt-out" policy given that the new funding formula acknowledges and rewards completion. A move in this direction would be consistent with current policies high schools and colleges have that award dual enrollment credit without student action.

The investment at the state level to develop this an "opt-out" policy would be marginal (less than \$1 million), with some cost implications at the institution level coinciding with current program or pathway mapping efforts.

Conclusion

The state of California and the higher education segments have demonstrated a commitment to supporting student success; yet, current efforts are insufficient for significantly reducing the credential gap. Many of the four million adults with some college but no degree that 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 their success by reducing the myriad barriers that prevent re-enrollment and hinder completion.

Current efforts to re-engage adults, as well as the policy recommendations in this report, are focused on the California Community Colleges, given it is the segment that serves the most adults, has the most institutional flexibility, and strong connections to workforce. However, comprehensively re-engaging adults with some college but no degree will require more participation by bachelor-degree granting institutions.

Regardless of where they look to attend college again, policies that support current and future adults and other returning students' ability to easily re-enroll and navigate the institution, reduce time to degree and minimize cost are key. These policies, however, cannot be adopted one-by-one or only at the institution level to support the four million adults with some college at scale. Implementation state- and systemwide must acknowledge the realities of the returning adult population; their history which often spans more than one institution, their barriers to returning are significant, and their motivation for completing their degree should be met with a system eager to accept them back.



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