Policy Brief Series: Adult Learners

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Adult learners represent

40%

of higher education's student population (NCES, 2020).

Policy Brief Series:
Adult Learners

Overview

Any efforts to reach North Carolina's degree attainment goal of 2 million by the year 2030 must be inclusive of the unique needs of adult learners in higher education.

Adult learners, representing 40% of higher education's student population (NCES, 2020), enter or return to higher education after the age of 24.

The empowerment of adult learners to complete a higher education degree or credential presents a significant opportunity to create a more educated workforce to meet the needs of the coming decades.

North Carolina Context

In North Carolina, only 42% of adults aged 25 to 64 have at least an associate's degree. Many of the adults in North Carolina without a degree have experience with higher education and have some college credit. In this "Some College, No Degree" group, there are approximately 1.18 million adults aged 25 to 64.
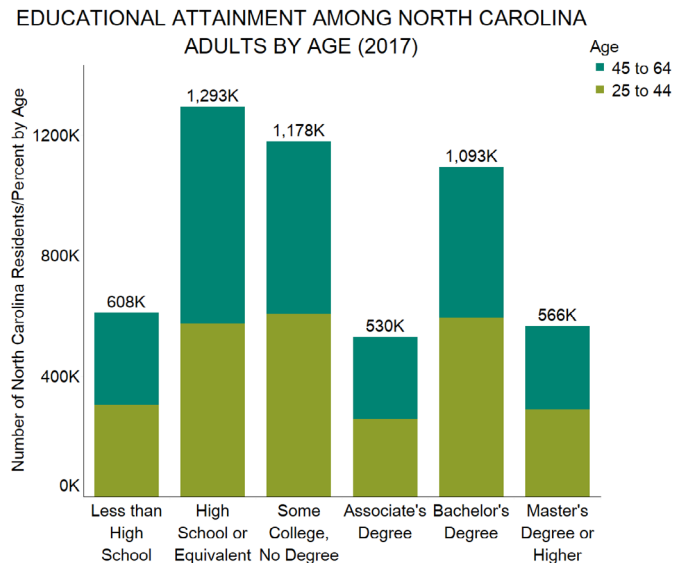

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG NORTH CAROLINA ADULTS BY AGE (2017)

Figure 1.
Source: Census Bureau (2017)

Educational attainment in North Carolina varies across race and ethnicity. Asian and white adults aged 18-64 are the most likely to have earned at least an associate's degree at 55% and 43% of the population, respectively. Black adults have the next highest rate of attaining an associate's or higher at 26%, followed by American Indian adults (21%) and Hispanic or Latino adults (16%) (Carolina Demography, 2018). Key differences also exist in the educational attainment of adult learners in rural and urban areas in North Carolina. Pictured in the map below, the urban counties near Raleigh and Charlotte are more likely to have an educational attainment of at least an associate's degree among 50% or more of their residents aged 25-64.
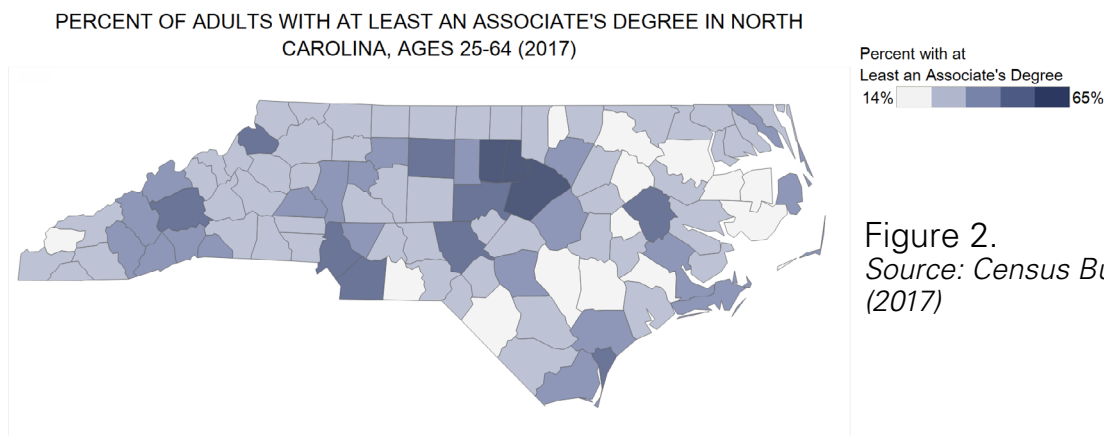

PERCENT OF ADULTS WITH AT LEAST AN ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE IN NORTH CAROLINA, AGES 25-64 (2017)

Figure 2.
Source: Census Bureau (2017)

Adult learners in North Carolina already enrolled in a college or university are critical to increasing educational attainment. Increasing rates of college attendance among youths alone will fall short of the state's need for 2 million working-age adults to complete a quality postsecondary degree or credential. Many adults aged 25 and over are enrolled in North Carolina's public universities and colleges, especially the community colleges. In the 58 North Carolina community colleges, 39% of the total headcount enrollment of degree or certificate seeking students comes from adults aged 25 and over. With 13% of degree-seeking students at UNC System institutions aged 25 and over, the total enrollment of adult learners across all of North Carolina's public community colleges and 4-year institutions is approximately 89,000 students.

Understanding the diversity of adult learners and how that translates into their unique challenges and needs is also essential to identifying the strategies to raise their educational attainment. In a national study of adult learners 25 or over, 44% were from non-white populations, 60% were women, and 70% were employed while they were enrolled (Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum, 2017). This diversity is reflected in the adult learner student population in North Carolina; in the University of North Carolina System, for example, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students are more likely to be 25 or over.
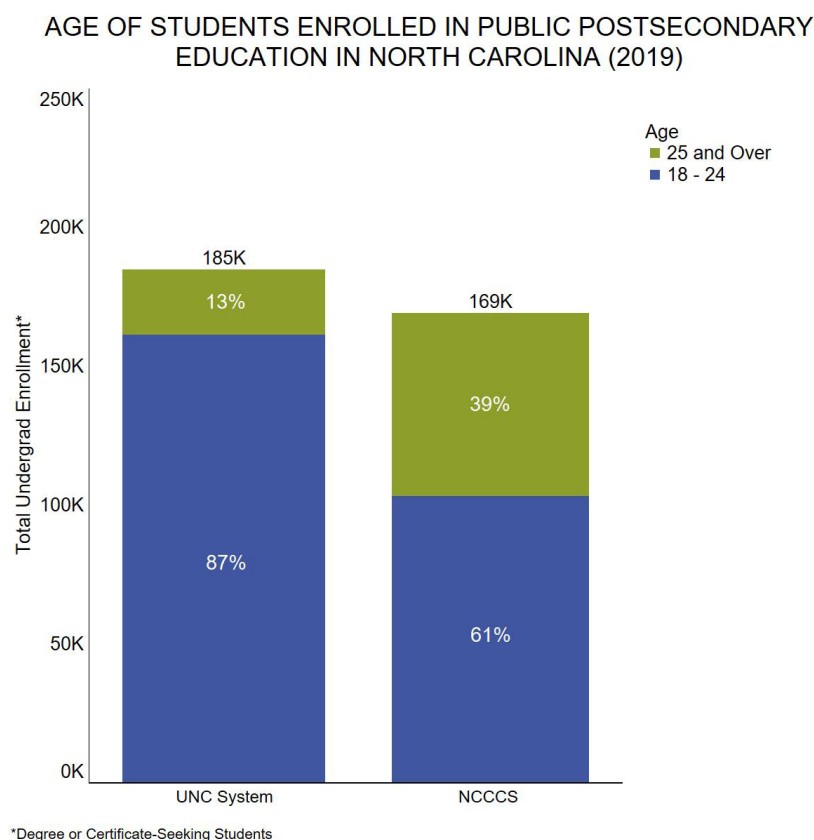
AGE OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PUBLIC POSTSECONDARY
EDUCATION IN NORTH CAROLINA (2019)

Figure 3.
Source: UNC System and NCCCS Data Dashboards

UNC SYSTEM UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT BY AGE AND RACE/ETHNICITY (2019)

Race

Race	25 and Over	24 and Under
American Indian or Alaska Native	24%	76%
Asian	8%	92%
Black or African American	14%	86%
Hispanic or Latino	12%	88%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	22%	78%
Non Resident Alien	10%	90%
Race/Ethnicity Unknown	20%	80%
Two or More Races	9%	91%
White	12%	88%

Age
- 24 and Under
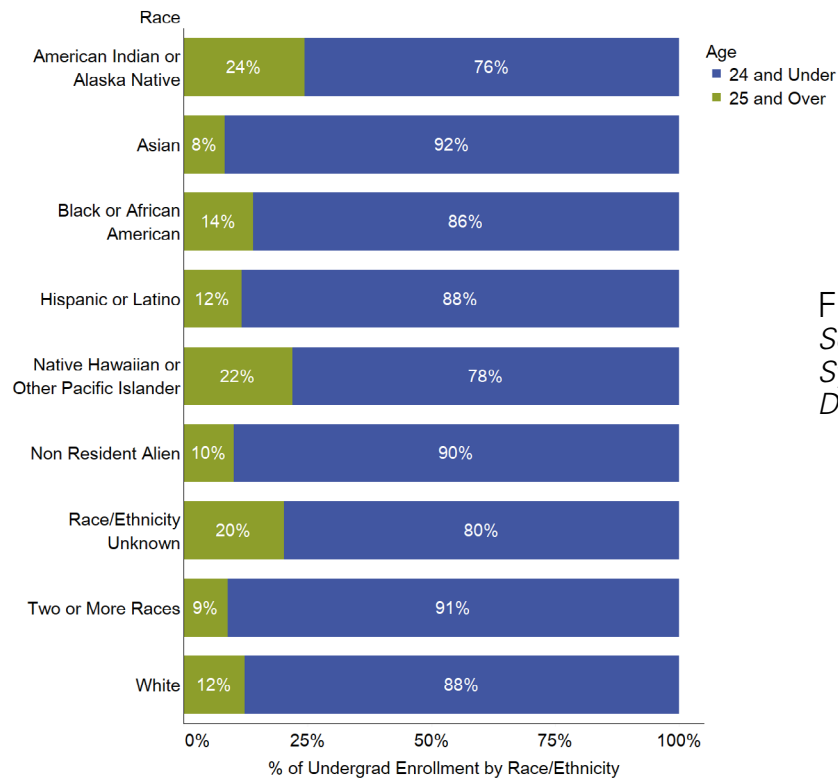- 25 and Over

% of Undergrad Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

Figure 4.
Source: UNC System Data Dashboard

PERCENTAGE OF ADULT LEARNERS AT NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS (2019)

- NCCCS Institutions
- UNC Institutions

Percent of Adult Learners	Number of Institutions
Less than 5%	3
5%-10%	1
10%-15%	4
15%-20%	6
20%-25%	1
25%-30%	6
30%-35%	13
35%-40%	12
40%-45%	16
45%-50%	7
More than 50%	5

Percent of Adult Learners in Undergraduate Population
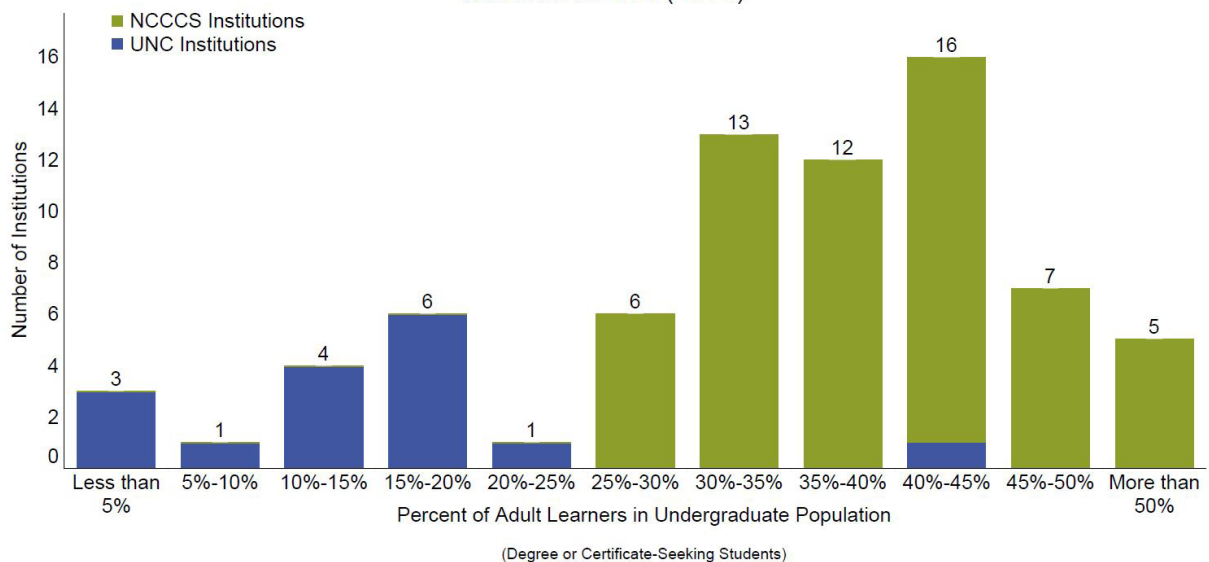
(Degree or Certificate-Seeking Students)

Figure 5.
Source: UNC System and NCCCS Data Dashboards.

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# Barriers to Attainment
for Adult Students

According to the Education Commission of the States, no state will realistically be able to meet their attainment goals without the participation of adult students in higher education (Pingel, Parker & Sisneros, 2016). However, adult learners face a number of barriers to college completion, including financial limitations, credit loss, doubts about the value of a degree or credential and difficulty navigating the higher education system.

BALANCING SCHOOL WITH NECESSITY OF WORK

Adults with some college, but no degree cite the difficulty of balancing school and work as the most common reason for stopping out of college (Strada Education Network, 2019). Despite this difficulty, continuing to work while enrolled may be necessary to afford higher education. Because of this needed income, adults with some college but no degree say that they are most likely to enroll in additional courses or training through their employer. Programs that integrate work and education can motivate adult learners towards completion. For example, the ApprenticeshipNC and BioNetwork programs in North Carolina pair on-the-job learning with job-related education at a community college.

DOUBTS ABOUT THE VALUE OF A DEGREE

In a national survey, 44% of Americans agreed that they do not have the needed skills or credentials to advance in their career. While the majority of respondents believed more education would give them an advantage in the workforce, those without a college degree were less likely to agree with that statement (Strada Education Network, 2020). Paired with the fact that affordability is a significant concern for adult learners (Strada Education Network, 2019), adult learners may have doubts regarding whether pursuing a degree is worth the cost. A national survey of adults aged 25-34 who did not have a college degree reflected these doubts, where respondents overestimated the expense of attending a community college, but underestimated the salaries of people with technical certifications and associate degrees (Kelly, 2015).
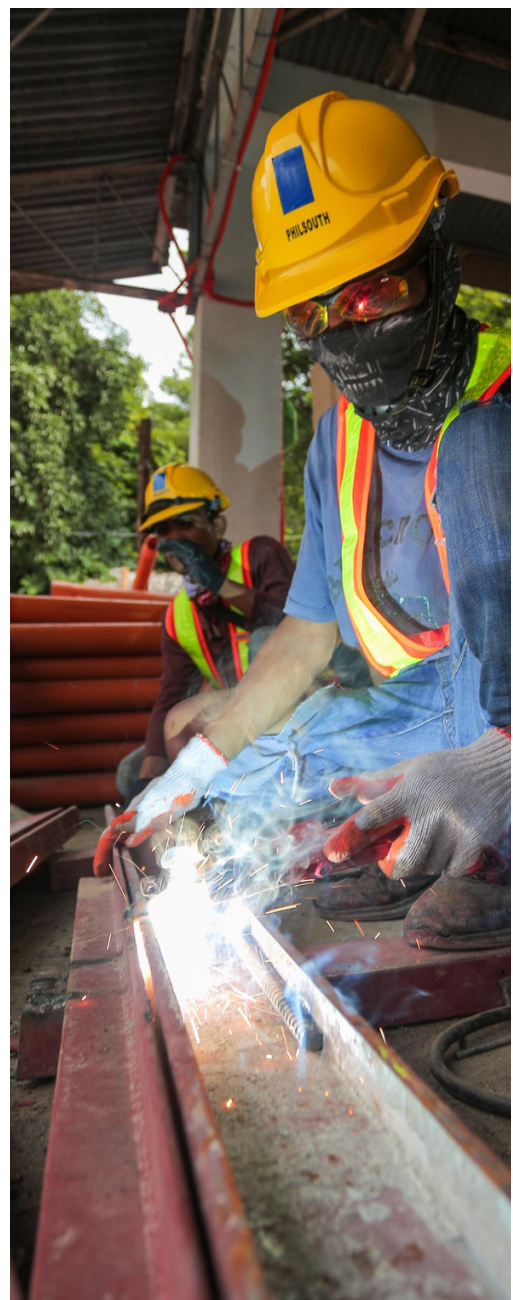
LINGERING DEBTS AT A PREVIOUS INSTITUTION

For adult learners who completed some college credit, past debts (e.g. unpaid library or parking fines) from their previous institution can also be a barrier. These debts contribute to discontinuing enrollment and preventing re-enrollment to finish a degree. These relatively small debts can lead to "standard credits," academic credits that cannot be applied toward a degree because the previous institution is using the student's transcript as collateral for unpaid fines. Adult learners, along with lower income students and Black, Latinx, and American Indian students are the most likely to owe outstanding balances that lead to stranded credits (Karon, Ward, Hill & Kurzweil, 2020). Most students who are affected by these policies would need to earn a credential to increase their income before being able to pay off their debts. Debt forgiveness programs to address stranded credits are growing in popularity, but are primarily limited in scope to individual institutions and are not state-wide programs. Two city-wide programs, Chicago Fresh Start and Detroit Reconnect, use debt forgiveness at multiple institutions to target adult learners with some college but no degree.

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NAVIGATING COLLEGE LANDSCAPES NOT BUILT FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Currently, higher education's youth-centric collegiate culture hinders both the entry and success of adult learners. Nationally, college course pathways toward a degree may not offer schedule flexibility for working students nor acknowledge learning that can happen outside of the traditional classroom (Chen, 2017; Strada Education Network, 2019). Degree curricula that do not allow a student to stop, requirements to re-apply after stopping out, and the lack of students service availability outside of typical working hours do not provide the flexibility needed by adult learners.

Adult students also describe a sense of not belonging and feeling "invisible" on campuses that are geared towards the "traditional" college student (Peck & Varney, 2009). This feeling can stem from not physically being on campus or the language and images colleges use in their website and direct student communication. For example, a college website that does not have any images of students who are older than about 20 years old, or frequent references to students "leaving mom and dad" for the first time can deter adult learners (Burks, 2020).

Current Efforts to Engage Adult Learners

EFFORTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Adult Promise[1] is a state-wide initiative that aims to support adult students. Along with North Carolina, the program is active in California, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Oregon and Washington. Funded by a grant from the Lumina Foundation and in partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), this program plans to link data from the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and the University of North Carolina System (UNC) and provide a streamlined source of information for adults who want to earn a college degree or certificate. In North Carolina, Adult Promise is comprised of three main efforts:

Implementation of Finish First at multiple institutions. Finish First is a data tool that identifies degree and certificate completion pathways for adult students at community colleges. The tool allows colleges to quickly identify previously enrolled students who have some college credit but no degree. The institution can award any credentials that have already been earned through coursework. Students who are 3-4 credits short of a credential receive outreach to encourage them to finish their degree. This tool as well as training and technical support related to the tool are free to community colleges.

Creation of a web portal focused on North Carolina adult learners, which will include adult student-specific information such as financial aid, learning modules, and credit transfer details.

Professional development for faculty, staff and administrators on adult students' prior learning in the workforce, military or other sources.

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[1] North Carolina is one of six states participating in the Adult Promise pilot program, joining California, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky and Ohio.

Courage to Credits stems from a 2013 state law which mandates that North Carolina's universities and community colleges grant college credits to veterans with military training. In this program, panels of academic faculty review a variety of military occupations and determine the course credit equivalencies veterans should uniformly received across all 58 NC community colleges and public UNC institutions.

Individual universities, community colleges, and their partners in North Carolina have also started actively recruiting adult learners and previously enrolled students. Some of these programs also target particular groups of workers to complete a degree (Brown-Graham & Bryant, 2018). Some initiatives include:

» **NCWorks Certified Career Pathways** has created upwards of 30 career pathways in high-demand fields with employer partnership.

» **Work-Based Training Programs** help students upgrade their skills so that they can advance to higher paying jobs in their current field.

   Examples: internships, co-ops, on-the-job training, transitional jobs, and apprenticeships

» **Military Experience and Training programs** award service members college credits for their military experience, giving them a momentum boost toward degree completion.

» **Partway Home Programs** identify and reach out to adults that attended college at some point in the past, but did not earn a degree.

   Examples: ECU's FINISH Initiative, North Carolina A&T's Aggies at the Goal Line, UNC Charlotte's 49er Finish

Efforts to update and improve state and institutional policy regarding Credit for Prior Learning are on-going and will be covered in more depth in an upcoming policy paper.

ADULT LEARNING EFFORTS IN OTHER STATES

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) policies award academic credit for prior learning acquired through life and employment, including military experience. Currently, twenty-four states have PLA policies, including Tennessee, West Virginia, Alabama and Maryland. In these

states, prior learning credits may be applied toward major or minor curriculum requirements at the community college or public four-year institutions (Education Commission of the States, 2017). North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia have not passed PLA policies at the state level.

Some states have implemented state-wide initiatives to address adult education. Two examples, from Mississippi and Tennessee, offer both financial assistance and coaching as the student navigates the application and re-enrollment process. Mississippi's Complete 2 Compete (C2C), initiated in 2017, is a state coordinated initiative that combines the resources of the community college and public university systems to match students with some college credits to the institution that provides the best pathway to completion. C2C coaches advise adults through the re-enrollment process to maximize earned credits toward a degree. C2C offers one-time $500 grants to qualifying students to be used to pay any past debts at public institutions or assist with expenses involved in re-enrolling. In its first year of implementation, C2C helped 503 adult students complete a degree.

Tennessee Reconnect allows eligible adults who have not earned a postsecondary degree to complete an associate's degree or certificate free of tuition and fees at one of the state's public two-year colleges. Tennessee Reconnect also pairs potential students with a "navigator" who assists the adult with institution-neutral advice and supports such as finding affordable childcare and transportation. Applications are selective, and controlled by the community college indicated in the student's application. In 2018-19, its first year of implementation, 18,217 adults enrolled in an eligible institution and received grant funding. Nearly all of these adult learners had some college experience, and more than half reported having dependents. Black students make up a larger share (21%) of Tennessee Reconnect recipients than in the state's adult population (15.4%). In this first year, the program saw a success rate of 61%, with over 2,000 students completing a degree, and nearly 9,000 students remaining enrolled for further progress toward completion (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020).

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Recommendations

Approaches to better meet the needs of adult learners in North Carolina should involve improvements to the flexibility of degree pathways, student services, and financial support at individual colleges and universities. Efforts should also include the use of similar supports statewide and the adoption of successful institutional initiatives statewide.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTITIONERS

Consider Alternate Course Structures & Schedules

Reassess the credit hour from a one-size-fits-all system and adopt competence-based education that offers flexibility in multiple pathways to obtaining a college degree (Chan, 2107). North Carolina Central University's End Zone Initiative is an interdisciplinary program that gives students who previously earned some coursework flexibility in their degree path. The program is designed to maximize credit transfer toward a degree. Flexible credit hours are particularly important from an equity perspective for adult students who need to work while they study. Odessa College in Texas developed an eight-week term schedule, which was better designed to support the adult learners, who are highly motivated to learn and may also be parents and full-time employees. This transition led to an increase in the number of students who have access to federal aid and credential completion (Odessa College, 2019).

Increase Availability of Student Services
Offer adult-centric services such as evening hour counseling services and career services designed for students navigating career transitions or second careers (Chan, 2017).

Incorporate Navigators to the Enrollment Process
Institutional and state programs such as Tennessee Reconnect and the 49er Finish program at UNC-Charlotte utilize navigators as a single point of staff contact that provides adult learners with free assistance college applications, financial aid, college costs and career exploration tools. This personal contact assists students who have shown interest in finishing their degree take the necessary next steps of applying, planning and enrolling in the college to complete the credential.

Remove Financial Barriers for Adult Students

» **Waive old debts and fines** previously enrolled students acquired at institutions when students want to re-enroll to complete their degree. Alternatively, institutions could follow the lead of programs such as Mississippi's Compete 2 Complete and offer a one-time $500 grant to cover any expenses students may have as they enroll, including paying any past debts to their previous institution(Karon, Ward, Hill & Kurzweil, 2020).

» **Remove institutional policies** that hold transcripts as collateral until debts such as late book fees or parking fines are paid.

» **Reevaluate the availability of institutional financial aid** to cover expenses for returning students. Some institutional financial aid that has been previously reserved for incoming first-year students in the form of need- or merit-based scholarships could be used to encourage adult learners to complete their degree.

» **Consider partnerships with local employers** to support students with additional expenses.

STATEWIDE RECOMMENDATIONS
Integrated Data Through Expansion of Finish First
Finish First has been implemented in 50 of the 58 NC community colleges. This tool integrates with enrollment data to quickly identify students who are close to or have already earned a credential. Expand this tool to all 58 community colleges as well as the 16 universities in the UNC System and integrate the data so that both NCCCS and UNC can make targeted outreach. This data integration would also paint a clearer picture of students' transfer patterns.

Course Equivalency/Degree Plan Database

Creating an online database that allows students and advisors to look up course equivalencies between institutions and/or baccalaureate degree plans would help students ensure that their credits will transfer to a new institution. Several other states have these online databases: Nevada has an equivalency database where students can look up courses they have taken by discipline or institution. Massachusetts allows students to look up degree paths by 4-year institution to determine which courses they need to take at the community college for a specific degree program at that 4-year institution.

High Demand Degree Pathways

Establish common degree pathways at the state level for high demand, high growth degrees so students will be guaranteed to receive credit for major courses after transferring. Florida, for example, has a statewide list of common prerequisites by degree program.

Targeted, Specific Outreach to Adults

Implementing Finish First at all 2- and 4-year institutions in the state would not only make it possible to specifically inform students of how many more classes they need to complete a degree. A coordinating agency could run a simple postcard campaign to reach out directly to these adults by email or mailing address. These communications could include specific information into the communication to personalize the message and recognize previous coursework the student has taken and use inclusive, welcoming language geared toward adult learners so that students understand that college is for them.

Coordination Between Community Colleges, Public Universities and Private Non-profit Colleges

All three types of NC institutions should collaborate to increase adult degree completion. Create one unit that coordinates efforts between all institutions, and consider having a completion advising unit to guide returning adults in the process of going back to college. Mississippi's Complete 2 Compete combines the resources of the state's community college and public universities to match students with some credits with the institution that provides the best pathway to completion. If a former student completed enough credits to earn an associate or bachelor's degree, that degree is automatically awarded. C2C coaches advise adults through the re-enrollment process to maximize earned credits toward a degree.

Remove Financial Barriers

Statewide higher education systems can play an important role in effectively increasing adult learners' degree attainment along with the recommended strategies for individual institutions. For example, the financial relief offered by Mississippi's C2C and Tennessee Reconnectis funded by the state's general funds and other state private funds, rather than by individual institutions. This coordinated financing creates more equitable opportunities for adult learners, regardless of which institution they plan to attend.

Communication Audit for Adult Inclusivity

Websites, email and mailed correspondence with students should send a message through its language and images that adult students are active at the institution and can thrive. College systems, rather than only individual institutions, should be advocates for inclusive communications to raise degree attainment statewide.

Ongoing Partnerships With State Workforce Development and Industry Leaders

State postsecondary systems can connect adult learners to job opportunities after graduation. Ask workforce partners communicate their need for workers with a degree and that they value degree completion as a company.

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