



PROMISING PRACTICES



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State Innovations for Near-Completers

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As of 2011, 31 million adults in the United States had some college credit but had not earned a postsecondary credential, defined in this brief as a near-completer.¹ These former students left postsecondary education for various reasons including, affordability, schedule inflexibility and life circumstances. In response to attainment goals and [workforce needs](#), states are aiming to reach these near-completers through legislation and initiatives, working to bring them back into a postsecondary institution to complete a credential.

More than 31 million adults in the United States have some college credit but no degree.

In addition to state action, many nonprofit foundations emphasize the importance of reaching this population. For example, Lumina Foundation highlighted returning adults as a priority population to reach the

60 percent attainment goal by the year 2020.² The Lumina Foundation estimates that 6.1 million of the 16.4 million additional credentials need to come from returning adults.³ Lumina Foundation's Strategic Plan for 2017-20 emphasizes the need to increase outreach to near-completers, specifically African-Americans, Hispanics and American Indians — populations with persistently low attainment rates.⁴

This brief provides an overview of the 2017 near-completer policy landscape and a detailed review of three states implementing innovative outreach to this population. State example information was gathered through personal communication with state-level staff on how their initiatives came about and the process of implementation unfolded. This brief also includes policy considerations for state leaders as they begin to create legislation or design initiatives to reach near-completers and help them earn a credential.

Of the 16.4 million credentials needed by 2025 to meet workforce demands, more than one-third will be drawn from individuals with some college credit and no degree.

Near-completers present specific needs including affordability, schedule flexibility and additional services.

Near-Completer 2017 Policy Landscape



In 2017, five states introduced seven bills focused on re-engaging students with some college credit, but no credential. Of those seven bills, one was enacted, two are pending and four failed. The states with legislative activity include **Delaware, Idaho, Maine, Michigan** and **Texas**.

Texas enacted [S.B. 1782](#), allowing institutions flexibility in the funding formula for returning adult students, which should in turn encourage institutions to reach out to this population. The bill requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to adopt rules requiring institutions to allow students who re-enroll, following a break in enrollment covering the preceding 24 months, and who successfully completed at least 50 semester credit hours, to drop one additional course from the amount currently allowed by the Education Code. The bill also provides that THECB not exclude semester credit hours for courses taken up to three times by students under this exception for hours reported for formula funding. The first 15 semester credit hours earned by a student under this exception will not count as excess undergraduate credit hours.

Of the bills that are pending or failed in 2017, the majority addressed college affordability for near-completers. For instance, [H.B. 190](#) in Idaho would have provided

for the Adult Postsecondary Completion Scholarship. Maine introduced [LD 946](#), which would have provided an income tax credit for students returning to college. Companion bills [H.B. 2290](#) and [S.B. 1103](#) in Texas would have established the Texas Returning Adult Student Grant Program for near-completers enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs at specific postsecondary institutions. The majority of bills introduced focused on affordability for this population.

The near-completer legislation introduced in 2017 mostly addressed financial supports for students returning to college. Although adults view affordability as a barrier to returning to college, other barriers exist including not fully understanding postsecondary options, as well as negative past experiences with postsecondary education. States can achieve higher success with near-completers with direct outreach, clear expectations for adult postsecondary success and community buy-in on the importance of a better educated state.

Promising Practice State Examples

Over the past several years, three states have been on the leading edge of efforts to re-engage near-completers in postsecondary education. **Indiana, Mississippi** and **Tennessee**, each in their own way, provide helpful information to state and system leaders looking to make near-completers a focus of postsecondary attainment efforts. The following state overviews provide a general summary of policy and practice efforts that may be useful to other state policy leaders looking for ideas to support near-completers in their context.

Indiana

In 2015, Indiana enacted Act 1001 and SEA 509, creating the Return and Complete project and expanded part-time financial aid programs specifically aimed at helping returning adults. From this legislation, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education launched the “You Can. Go Back.” campaign aimed to help the more than 750,000 adults with some college credit, but no degree, finish a credential.⁵

To reach this population, the commission established a steering committee (25-30 members) with representation from each of the state's public institutions as well as key education-focused organizations (including [Indiana Student Financial Aid Association](#) and the [Indiana Academic Advising Network](#)). The committee examined ways to add or modify current policies to help adult learners, including institutions providing a list of incentives to returning adults (i.e. loan forgiveness or small debt waivers). The commission then partnered with a marketing firm to survey adults regarding resources needed to come back to higher education. The survey results focused mostly on adults wanting higher levels of income and needing the accomplishment of earning a credential. The information from the survey shaped campaign messaging materials focused on providing a personalized motivation for individuals to return to postsecondary education.

“You Can. Go Back. was meant to be motivational.”
- Indiana representative

Indiana also saw importance in working with institutions in their approach to near-completers. The commission provided guidance to institutions on how to implement the outreach campaign on their individual campuses. Institutions had the choice to partner with the commission or conduct outreach individually. The commission identified potential students by credits earned — either 15 credits for community college students or 30 credits for bachelor students. Indiana partnered with a marketing firm to create branding and a website targeting near-completers.

The You Can. Go Back. campaign included emails, outbound calls and postcards. Currently, returning adults can utilize an inbound call service to learn more about returning to postsecondary education and which institutions might be the best fit for their interests. Thirty higher education institutions participate in the campaign,

including many private institutions. Institutional engagement was extremely important for the commission to move the campaign forward. The commission worked closely with government relations partners on campuses to ensure they addressed any issues the institutions voiced and made modifications to practice as necessary.

“The key was flexibility during the legislative process.”
- Indiana representative

Indiana had more than 9,000 students re-enroll in postsecondary education institutions in 2016 due in part through the You Can. Go Back. campaign. A key factor regarding the large number of returners was the flexibility institutions provided for satisfactory academic progress (SAP). The commission entered agreements with institutions to provide flexibility to students who have been out of school for two or more years. Students would have a grace period to maintain eligibility for financial aid while improving their SAP.

The commission evaluated the website usage, deciding to open the resource to adult learners with no previous credit earned. The You Can. Go Back. website — currently being updated — will soon allow adults without previous credit to use the resources through the campaign, i.e. the You Can. Go Back. college match function per individual needs, to enter a postsecondary institution.

The Indiana case study highlights the importance of a strong marketing outreach campaign to near-completers in the state. Starting with a well-supported piece of legislation, Indiana launched the You Can. Go Back. campaign centered on re-engaging adult learners. The campaign created and disseminated postcards, emails and phone calls to connect with near-completers. Postcards directly identified with a myriad of life situations to speak to individuals on a personal level. Meeting adults where they are in life proved to be a successful tactic for Indiana in the marketing campaign.

Mississippi

In 2016, Mississippi launched the Complete 2 Compete (C2C) program reaching out to near-completers who earned some college credit but no degree or credential. Gov. Phil Bryant announced the C2C program at a November 2016 board meeting and stated he would provide some of the start-up funds for the initiative. The C2C program is funded in part from grants awarded by the Mississippi Department of Human Services and the Mississippi Department of Employment Security. The Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (ILS) and the Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB) partnered for the C2C campaign.

“This partnership will ensure Mississippi remains attractive to business and industry looking for a favorable tax climate and a workforce ready to excel on day one. I am grateful to everyone involved in making it a reality”
- Gov. Phil Bryant

A key driver of C2C was the support of state longitudinal data systems used to identify individuals eligible to participate in the program. Due to a data sharing memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the MCCB and the ILS, the state could use merged data from the two systems to compile 15 years of unit record data on student enrollment and degrees earned in the state. The merged data set, including more than 825,000 students, was then used to identify eligible persons to participate in C2C. After removing records from the dataset for reasons including institutional holds, currently enrolled students and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) flags initiated by the students, Mississippi had approximately 160,000 near-completers eligible for the program.

“Moving forward, institutions are currently preparing to track these students with special coding and will have the ability to run progress reports as the students matriculate through their coursework.”
- Mississippi representative

Mississippi contracted with a marketing firm to develop a web portal and a personalized marketing campaign reaching out to these former students. The [informational website](#) features an interactive website, with personalized URLs (pURL) to follow. After entering their pURL, former students will be directed to a webpage with pre-populated, personalized information. From there individuals can update their information and indicate how they would like to proceed. Some options include identifying major areas, preference for course-taking type, location of desired campus, etc.

The initiative is also developing a personalized marketing campaign for the target data set so each marketing touch speaks to them personally. Additional outreach includes posters and handouts in [WIN job centers](#), back-to-school folders for parents, military facilities and additional public forums.

The C2C initiative engaged 23 higher education institutions throughout the process with each institution identifying C2C support staff to be involved in the campaign. Each institution also identified three individuals designated as the Adult Learning Focus Institution (ALFI) Committee from their institution to coordinate the ALFI toolkit surveys. These surveys were conducted at 22 institutions and included the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey and the Adult Learner Inventory⁶. The Council for Adult Experiential Learning helped facilitate these surveys. The C2C initiative conducted an ALFI Summit for committee

members to deliver results and discuss next steps. Each institution also identified a C2C Leader⁷ and C2C Coach⁸ to help facilitate the initiative on their campuses and help students re-enroll.

As a component of the initiative, the chief academic officers at the universities all contributed to the creation of a system-wide Adult Degree Completion Program. The program offers a flexible path to a bachelor's degree and provides institutions with authority to waive institutional policies that apply to traditional degree programs. The program is intended for students who completed at least 90 credit hours and had not attended a postsecondary institution in the past 24 consecutive months, based on last date of attendance.

Mississippi used the data available in the state to directly identify students eligible for the initiative. This data utilization ability proves extremely important as the near-completer population can be very difficult to find or contact. The data utilization also provided the stark numbers of students who have enough credits to earn an associate or bachelor's degree with no further credit needed. The numbers help highlight the usefulness of this initiative for the near-completer population to institutions and the public. This state example also highlights the importance of having strong backing from a champion, in this case, the governor.

Tennessee

In 2017, Gov. Haslam announced his plan to expand last-dollar scholarships (similar to the [Tennessee Promise](#)) for adult students. Tennessee recognized that the state needs around 220,000 degrees from the adult population to meet the Drive to 55 goal – the drive to get 55 percent of Tennesseans equipped with a college degree or certificate by 2025.⁹ Currently, 2.1 million adults in Tennessee do not have a postsecondary credential and 900,000 adults in Tennessee have some college credit, but no degree.¹⁰ On June 1, 2017, the governor signed [H.B. 531](#) into law, establishing a last-dollar scholarship for adults to attend a community college tuition-free.

“It (H.B. 531) went through the legislature pretty quickly. I think this is due to the hard work done by the governor’s staff, THEC, TSAC, etc. in 2014 when Tennessee Promise was proposed and passed.”
– Tennessee representative

The legislation set eligibility requirements for students including:

- Seek a first associate or bachelor degree.
- Be a Tennessee resident for at least one year preceding the date of application for the grant.
- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and be deemed an independent student.
- Be admitted to an eligible institution and enroll in a degree or certificate program at least part-time (six semester hours) beginning with the 2018-19 year.
- Participate in an advising program approved by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC).¹¹

In order to maintain grant eligibility, students must enroll in classes leading to an associate's degree or certificate, maintain a 2.0 grade point average and maintain continuous enrollment.

Similar to Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect is funded through the [Tennessee Education Lottery](#) and is estimated to cost close to \$10 million once fully implemented. The lottery funds are transferred into a trust that is irrevocable and the interest is used to fund the scholarships. Initial estimates show the average award will amount to \$400-700 per year, depending on the enrollment status of the student. These numbers were calculated using data from THEC and Tennessee Student

Assistance Corporation (TSAC) student information systems, including demographics, enrollment, financial aid, etc. Based on this data, the state assumes there are currently 20,000 adults eligible for the grant.

The Tennessee Reconnect initiative works to help those adults who may be ineligible for federal aid. TSAC provides counseling services to help students get out of debt and is collaborating with individual institutions to waive holds, such as library fines and parking tickets, that may prohibit a student from re-entering postsecondary education. THEC is also exploring options of microgrants and emergency aid.

Since legislation recently passed, Tennessee is in the early stages of marketing the opportunity to prospective students. THEC plans to equip several partners with marketing tools to create consistent branding and messaging. This will include providing outreach toolkits to partners, such as higher education institutions, community-based partners and workforce/employer partners. The intended timeline is to launch the marketing campaign by spring 2018, prior to the official launch of the Tennessee Reconnect grant in fall 2018.

Tennessee presents a state example highlighting the importance of college affordability for adult learners. As mentioned earlier, one of the main concerns for adult learners going to or returning to college is affordability. The state prioritized adult student needs by providing free community college for adult learners and near-completers. Like Mississippi, Tennessee uses the strong support from the governor to garner attention and buy-in for the legislation and resulting initiative. Although the marketing plan is not complete to-date, the state understands the importance of communicating the initiative to students and highlighting the importance of returning to college.

State Example Analysis

All three examples provide best practices for states looking to re-engage near-completers. Each state emphasized the importance of engaging institutions in the

process of creating the initiative and utilized the support of a strong champion in the state. Two of the three states started their initiatives with legislation sending a message of importance regarding near-completers. Although not required, legislation can provide a lever to enhance the importance of an initiative. Data utilization proved a key component in successful outreach and identification of near-completers in each state. Building a strong data system enables increased student connection as it can be difficult to locate students once they leave postsecondary education. Finally, with affordability continuing to be a barrier for students, these state examples aimed to lessen that blockade with options such as free community college or waivers of SAP policies for financial aid eligibility. Financial levers can prove highly effective when used to benefit students facing adversity returning to college.

Policy/Initiative Considerations

As states seek to re-engage the near-completer student population, some considerations should be explored. These include the following:

- A strong marketing outreach campaign proves to be vital in re-engaging near-completers. States should invest in outreach tools including postcards, flyers, emails, television or radio spots, and individualized URLs. The last marketing tool provides direct services to near-completers by easing the process.
- States might consider reviewing existing legislation to align new initiatives with current policy. An example is revamping reverse transfer policies to include students not currently enrolled in postsecondary education.
- Affordability tends to be an issue for adult learners. States might consider specific postsecondary financing opportunities, for example [free community college](#), that cater to the adult learner and their possible need to attend part-time, online or in a competency-based education (CBE) environment.
- Extensive data utilization helps identify eligible students for near-completer efforts. States should

evaluate the current data available and assess how to use it for student identification and outreach. Data utilization also allows for transcript evaluation to correctly identify students and their academic needs coming back to a postsecondary institution.

- Adult learners require a unique set of student services separate from traditional students. States and institutions should consider flexibility in course scheduling, availability of online learning, ability to earn college credits through prior learning assessments and CBE models.
- In addition to educational supports, adult learners may need social supports, including housing, food, child care, etc. Aligning education funding policies with social support policies can help adult students access these resources.

Final Thoughts

The state examples discussed in this brief provide promising practices in reaching the important near-completer population. Strategies — including a clear marketing campaign, state-level data utilization, financial incentives and stakeholder support — allowed these three states to successfully implement initiatives aimed at increasing credential attainment among near-completers. As with most statewide education initiatives, states can learn from the successes and challenges from pathfinder peers that adopted policies early on. Education Commission of the States is committed to ensuring that policymakers and other education stakeholders are well-informed on the important issue of postsecondary completion and will continue to provide updates as state policies supporting returning adults evolve.

ENDNOTES

1. Doug Shapiro, Afet Dundar, Xin Yuan, Autumn T. Harrell, Justin C. Wild, Mary B. Ziskin, *Some College, No Degree, A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion* (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014), https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC_Signature_Report_7.pdf (accessed July 10, 2017), (accessed July 10, 2017).
2. “Priorities,” Lumina Foundation, 2017, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/priorities> (accessed July 11, 2017).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Indiana Commission for Higher Education, *You Can Go Back. Campaign Overview* (Indiana: Learn More Indiana, 2016), <http://www.learnmoreindiana.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/You-Can-Go-Back-Campaign-Overview-and-FAQs-2.pdf> (accessed July 11, 2017).
6. “Adult Learning Focused Institution of Higher Education,” Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, <http://isas.cael.org/> (accessed July 11, 2017).
7. C2C Leader: The individual at your campus that will serve as the primary point of contact for all C2C activities. (This may or may not be different from your ALFI Leader.) There will be times when the system level C2C project manager will need to contact others on your campus, but the college C2C lead will serve as the main point of contact.
8. The C2C Coach (Advisor) will be the initial contact for an adult student to guide them through the admission process. This person will also serve as the initial contact for all C2C website inquiries for your institution. The C2C Coach will receive training on the C2C website, student dashboard, reporting, etc. Others involved with C2C from your institutions will be invited to participate in this training, but the C2C Coach will be responsible for the day-to-day management of the C2C dashboard.
9. “Drive to 55 Alliance,” Drive to 55 Alliance, 2014, <http://driveto55.org/> (accessed July 11, 2017).
10. “One Pager: Tennessee Reconnect,” NextTennessee, 2017, <https://www.tn.gov/nexttennessee/topic/nt-one-pagertennessee-reconnect> (accessed July 11, 2017).
11. Ibid.

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