NON-TRADITIONAL NO MORE

Policy Solutions for Adult Learners

Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the *Non-traditional No More* Project

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WICHE
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About WICHE

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) is an interstate compact created by formal legislative action of the states and the U.S. Congress. Its mission is to work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence for all citizens of the West. Member states are:

Alaska	Idaho	Oregon
Arizona	Montana	South Dakota
California	Nevada	Utah
Colorado	New Mexico	Washington
Hawaii	North Dakota	Wyoming

WICHE's broad objectives are to:

- Strengthen educational opportunities for students through expanded access to programs.
- Assist policymakers in dealing with higher education and human resource issues through research and analysis.
- Foster cooperative planning, especially that which targets the sharing of resources.

This publication was prepared by the Policy Analysis and Research unit, which is involved in the research, analysis, and reporting of information on public policy issues of concern in the WICHE states. This report is available free of charge online at www.wiche.edu/publications. For more information about this project, please visit www.wiche.edu/ntnm. For additional inquiries, please contact the Policy Analysis and Research unit at (303) 541-0269 or policy@wiche.edu.

About HCM Strategists

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First and foremost, we would like to thank the project teams in the six states in which this project took place. Without their innovative solutions, hard work, and dedication to improving the opportunities for adults returning to college to complete their degrees, this report would not have the detailed solutions and creative strategies that can hopefully spread to others interested in pursuing this type of effort.

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Finally, we must acknowledge the longstanding commitment of Lumina Foundation for making this work possible. Holly Zanville, our program officer, has shown a sustained dedication to this topic. Through the foundation's support, adults with prior college credit in these six states now face an easier path to returning to college to complete their degrees.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation, its officers, or its employees.

Foreword

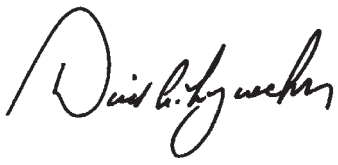
As we hope will be reflected in this profile of participating states, the *Non-traditional No More* project was just plain fun, and it isn't that often that you can say that about state policy work. So, what made this so much fun? Well, it was that the project turned out to foster philosophically sound, pragmatically responsive, knowledge-building, and cost-effective policy and practice within the six states and many institutions involved.

By focusing on students who were already well on their way to a college degree before dropping out, albeit often many years in the past, the project fit philosophically with the mission of American higher education: to provide educational opportunity to all who are able to benefit from it. After all, here we had students who had demonstrated by their previous performance that they were "college ready." All we had to do to serve them well was break down the barriers that had impeded their previous efforts.

This population of students also provided a pragmatic way to address national calls for increasing the numbers of college graduates. Without them, we simply cannot meet the educational attainment goals set by Lumina Foundation, the president, and others. Furthermore, we all learned a great deal about how better to serve this group of students. Keep in mind: these states were already a group of the willing. Only states that were committed to serving this population pursued the opportunity to participate in this Lumina Foundation-funded program. Indeed, almost all of the states and institutions thought participating and succeeding in this project would be a piece of cake because they knew they were already "adult friendly." What we all learned, however, is that even the most adult-friendly state policy environments and institutional efforts left a lot to be desired. Virtually every state and institution involved learned how better to serve these adult students. And we at WICHE also learned a great deal, not only about how to serve these students but also about how we could improve the ways in which we facilitated the efforts of multiple states and institutions.

Finally, we discovered a very efficient method of responding to the current environment. With a quite modest investment, we could increase the number of graduates and foster a new cadre of supporters within the state.

We complete this project having greatly enjoyed the experience. Truth be told, however, the jury is still out on just how successful the program has been. These efforts are still in their infancy, so it is a bit early to claim great success: we simply don't have the evidence yet to know how well they are working. And we may never know all that we should know because we still lack precise metrics of success. None of these projects were done in a perfect action-research environment, so other factors such as an adverse fiscal environment or complementary reform will confound attempts to measure the efficacy of the efforts. We will continue to try to do so, though, and at the very least, we had a great time and think we made a positive difference. We are greatly indebted to Lumina Foundation for the financial and staff support that made this effort possible.



David A. Longanecker
President
Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

Executive Summary

Background

From 2008 to 2011, WICHE worked with six states to improve policies and practices to increase adult degree completion as a way to raise overall state educational attainment levels. With funding from Lumina Foundation, the project, known as *Non-traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners*, identified and eliminated barriers that keep adults with prior college credit from returning to postsecondary education and completing their degrees.

By bringing together state and institutional leaders from Arkansas, Colorado, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, and South Dakota (states identified through a competitive application process), the project pursued two main objectives: identifying "ready adults," or those who earned a significant number of prior college credits before leaving postsecondary education without earning a credential; and building a pathway to postsecondary success. The states received modest two-year subgrants to pursue these objectives and joined the project in three cohorts.

Ready Adults: *Individuals who have earned a significant number of prior college credits before leaving postsecondary education without earning a credential.*

The first objective entailed mining state and institutional data to identify those adults who met a state's definition of ready adult. While these criteria varied depending on the state, they tended to focus on former students who completed at least half and usually three-quarters of the credits necessary for a degree before stopping out. Almost all states in the project were able to identify significant numbers of former students who met their definition.

Work on the second objective—building pathways to success—resulted in a range of policy options and innovative practices that could help states raise overall degree attainment. This work approached the issue comprehensively, examining state and institutional policy and practice barriers in five areas: data, academic affairs, student services, financing and financial aid, and communications and outreach. While many barriers spanned multiple areas, this approach allowed participants to focus on the broad and complex factors that can hinder adult degree completion.

As part of the subgrant application process, WICHE required all states to form working groups to tackle each of these five areas. State applicants identified state and institutional representatives to populate the working groups that focused on identifying and addressing barriers that can prevent ready adults from returning and completing their degrees. Early on in the project virtually all working groups discovered that few of the barriers fit neatly into one particular area. As a result, group members avoided the "silo mentality" and intentionally worked across subject areas to improve the environment for ready adults. Most states reconfigured their working groups during the second year of the project as a way to develop and implement cross-cutting solutions.

The working groups conducted their business through a series of meetings. During each year of the project, states were required to participate in one WICHE-faciliated meeting in which WICHE staff and a team of consultants led in-depth discussions about barriers and solutions related to serving ready adults. States also convened three intrastate meetings without WICHE staff participation to carry momentum forward over the course of the two-year project. Finally, WICHE staff convened an annual state leader meeting in which project leaders from all six states gathered to share promising strategies and learn from one another about how to better serve ready adults.

Rationale

The rationale for *Non-traditional No More (NTNM)* is based on the need for states to raise overall degree attainment rates. While states recognize the importance of improving outcomes in the traditional education pipeline, there is growing recognition that

they will not be able to meet ambitious attainment goals without also improving the rate at which adults complete degrees.

Whether one focuses on Lumina Foundation's goal of having 60 percent of the adult population with a postsecondary credential by 2025, the Obama administration's goal of having the highest degree attainment rates in the world, or the various state targets, serving this population is clearly necessary.

Census data show that 22 percent of the adult population has some college credit but no degree.[1] While certainly not all of these former students earned a significant amount of credit, reaching out to the ones who came close to earning a degree could help raise state degree attainment levels relatively quickly and efficiently.

The NTNM project refers to these potential students as "ready adults," but others use terms like "stop outs" or "near completers." Whatever term is used, one thing is clear: serving this population is key to reaching the varied local, state, and national education attainment goals set by elected officials, policymakers, and education leaders.

The purpose of the following case studies is to provide a comprehensive account of the NTNM effort and an investigation of the lessons learned in each of the project states.

Key Findings

Over the course of the project, participants identified numerous barriers at both the state and institutional levels that, if addressed, could help raise degree completion rates by adults with prior college credit. Participants also developed and implemented new policies, strategies, and tools to address these barriers and make it more likely that adults with prior college credit could return to postsecondary education and earn their degrees.

It is important to note that participants worked to address barriers at all stages of the process that adults must go through to return and complete their degrees. Improved data mining and outreach campaigns helped attract former students back to institutions, while more comprehensive advising eased readmission processes. Transparent but fair acceptance of transfer credit and credit for prior learning allowed returning adults to progress quickly and develop new skills and knowledge without repeating material they had already learned. New degree programs offered pathways to degree completion that valued prior coursework while maintaining the academic rigor of a college degree.

State governance structures also played an important role in policy choices. Given that fact, not all of the strategies and promising practices presented here may be successfully implemented in other states and other contexts. The participating states had diverse governance structures, ranging from highly centralized state authority over institutions to decentralized systems with relatively independent institutions. States with decentralized structures tended to employ subgrant strategies to incentivize changes in institutional behaviors, while states with more centralized structures opted more for systemwide policy changes. Both approaches can create better environments for returning adults when replicated but must be appropriate for the specific state and institutional contexts.

Outcomes and Results

This report does not lay claim to specific numbers of adults who returned and completed their degrees as a result of this project. Few states have the capacity in their data systems to track course completions and degrees obtained by returning adults in general, let alone those who may have been targeted by outreach efforts from the project.

Some institutions involved have reported on numbers of degrees completed through programs developed as part of this project, but these reports generally include the caveat that many others may have returned without entering a particular degree completion program. Rather than focus on specific numbers, this report emphasizes the improvements in the environment for returning adults and the elimination of barriers that may have prevented them from completing degrees.

Data collection about this population remains a significant challenge. Some states have made progress and now require institutions to gather and report more data about returning adults. Further, initial results in the project states suggest that the environment for returning adults has improved

significantly. These are important steps forward and will make it easier for subsequent efforts to accurately identify the number of returning adults who complete degrees. WICHE remains committed to following progress in these states and will monitor outcomes and degree completions in the coming years.

General Recommendations and Promising Strategies

The strategies and tools implemented by states and institutions can address a wide range of barriers, but many were effective because they were implemented within a particular state context. The following section outlines the general recommendations for successfully implementing an effort to boost degree completion by ready adults. These general recommendations are followed by specific promising strategies that were identified and tested by the NTNM states and institutions.

General recommendations. While not every idea is applicable in every state, the process by which states developed solutions has led to eight general recommendations for those working to reach and reengage adults with significant prior college credit.

1. **Data mining is a critical first step in reengaging ready adults.**

States and institutions can mine their student record databases to identify large numbers of former students who left after earning significant college credits. These individuals can be targeted with direct communications that highlight available services and programs that could ease their path to earning a degree, as well as provide personalized information about completion options.

States streamlined their direct outreach by first filtering lists of former students through the National Student Clearinghouse to eliminate those who already graduated from other institutions.

Many states and institutions found that contact information for students in their databases was outdated, however. Partnering with private-sector data aggregation firms proved to be a cost-effective solution and provided current contact information for former students.

2. **Strong buy-in by both state and institutional leaders is necessary to address barriers.**

Successful projects all had strong champions at both the state and institutional levels. Having individuals in key leadership positions who understand the imperative for serving this population is a necessary step for building sustainable and effective efforts to serve returning adults.

3. **Conversations between institutions and state policymakers are key.**

Both state and institutional policies and practices have a large impact on returning adults, even in states with highly decentralized governance structures. As in many other issues facing higher education, key state leaders and policymakers must work cooperatively and share their perspectives on ways to improve the environment for returning adults. States that have established formal mechanisms for ongoing communication have been able to sustain their efforts and provide feedback as new programs and policies are implemented.

4. **Assessing how well institutions and states currently serve adult learners is important to demonstrate success.**

States and institutions must develop a clear and accurate picture of how well their current policies and practices serve adults with prior college credit. By conducting policy audits and gathering data and information from the student perspective, policymakers and institutional leaders can better understand current strengths as well as gaps where student needs are not being met.

5. **A single point of contact for returning adults can ease the reentry process without significant new resources.**

The reentry process can be difficult for ready adults. In many states, institutions have implemented a single point of contact for adults to help guide them through the application and readmission process. Called reentry “concierges” in Nevada, they can not only help place returning adults on the most efficient path toward degree completion, but they can also provide important feedback at the institution about potential policy and practice barriers that could be eliminated.

6. Broad outreach campaigns are necessary to reach all potential students.

As noted earlier in this section, data mining can be a very effective first step in identifying large numbers of ready adults in a state. Policymakers and institutional leaders must recognize, however, that there are almost certainly large numbers of ready adults in a state or near an institution who are not in any of the relevant databases. These individuals may have attended private institutions or started their academic careers at an out-of-state institution before stopping out. Migration may also be a large factor as adults who earned significant credit in another state may move for reasons related to family or career.

Outreach campaigns can help bring these "hard to find" ready adults back to institutions to complete their degrees. While these types of campaigns, when done effectively, can quickly escalate in cost, several states developed low-cost approaches. One strategy was to take advantage of free media exposure through local news stories that highlighted successful degree completers.

Outreach campaigns can also target employers or large pockets of potential ready adults, such as military bases, to spread the word about degree completion opportunities.

7. Examining the data to better understand ready adults is an important first step to serving them efficiently.

There are often misconceived notions about ready adults, but examining the data can help determine what approaches are likely to be most effective. For instance, one myth surrounding ready adults is that they cannot handle the academic rigor of a postsecondary degree. Data from South Dakota and New Jersey suggested that these students mostly left due to financial reasons or because of obligations and responsibilities outside of school. South Dakota's analysis of its ready adults showed that they had slightly better GPAs and performance on state competency exams than all other students.[2]

The lessons here are twofold. First, there should not be significant concern that ready adults are ill-prepared academically. Second, programs for returning adults must be able to meet needs and provide flexibility to help adults address these non-academic barriers should they arise again.

8. Flexibility to adjust policies and practices to meet the varied needs of ready adults is necessary to help them overcome barriers.

Project participants discovered quickly that flexibility was a crucial component of any effort to serve ready adults. While many institutions provide flexible course schedules to meet the needs of working students, policies and practices in other areas may be needlessly rigid making it more difficult for returning adults to succeed.

Advisors working with returning adults found that they had to offer flexible schedules to meet these students' needs. Institutional business offices could not follow traditional hours and expect to meet the needs of adults who might be working during that time period. Similarly, state systems and institutions needed flexibility to address low grades students may have received previously after walking away from courses in the middle of the semester.

An emphasis on flexibility allowed states to meet the needs of students that previously might not have been able to return and complete their degrees. It is important to note that this flexibility must have limits and cannot give adults special treatment compared to traditional students.

Promising strategies. In addition to the general strategies that were effective for state and institutional leaders in addressing policy and practice barriers for ready adults, the project uncovered numerous barriers and potential strategies for addressing those barriers. The section below lists five areas in which project participants identified barriers along with specific strategies and tools that states and institutions employed to address these barriers and provide clearer paths to degree completion for ready adults.

1. Insufficient information—Adults with prior credit who are considering returning to college may not understand the opportunities available to complete their degrees. A related information gap is that faculty, administrators, and even state policymakers may not have an accurate understanding of this population.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Ready adults may not have considered returning to complete their degrees.
- Ready adults may not understand how close they are to a degree or that they have already met degree requirements.
- Institutions may not provide sufficient faculty/administration support for serving ready adults.
- Some may assume these students left because they were academically unqualified.

Promising strategies:

- **Targeted outreach**: Using data mining to identify former students who are close to degrees enables states and institutions to craft targeted outreach messages encouraging these ready adults to return to complete degrees. Although contact information may be out of date for these ready adults, states and institutions have used private sector data matching firms to obtain current information.
- **Broad public outreach campaigns:** Not all ready adults can be contacted through direct outreach. Some may have moved to the area or attended private institutions, meaning they would not show up in a data mining effort. Broader outreach campaigns, based on market research, that encourage adults to return to complete degrees can be effective.
- **Internal communication campaigns:** Outreach efforts should also work to build support among key stakeholders for serving ready adults. Developing state and institutional champions is crucial to long-term success.
- **Data analysis:** Understanding how this population performed when previously enrolled in postsecondary education can help eliminate myths about their readiness to handle high-level academic work.
- **Personalized advising:** Ready adults may have credits from multiple institutions or academic programs and need more robust advising to help them determine the best possible path to earn a degree or credential of value.

2. Inadequate institutional policy and practice—Most institutions assume that they serve non-traditional students well. Understanding institutional policies and practices from the student's perspective can help leaders identify any gaps.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Institutional policies and practices can be aimed at the "traditional student" even though adults comprise an ever larger share of student populations.
- Institutional policies often place students in developmental classes based solely on the results of high stakes tests.
- Many ready adults walked away from classes and were left with low grades impacting their ability to earn a degree.

Promising strategies:

- **Provide reentry concierges:** Many states and institutions are providing single points of contact for returning adults to navigate the reentry process.
- **Secret Shoppers:** Some states had "secret shoppers" pose as potential returning adults to better understand the reentry process from the student perspective.
- **Policy and practice audits:** Policy and practice audits help states and institutions understand how well they serve ready adults. Tools like CAEL's Adult Learner Focused Institution (ALFI) survey can identify areas for improvement.
- **Redesign gateway courses:** Many institutions have redesigned gateway courses, particularly college-level math, to improve both student success and institutional efficiency.
- **Academic amnesty:** Institutions and states can implement policies that allow students to eliminate grades that may have been due to simply walking away from school rather than sub-par academic performance.

3. Unintended consequences of state policies—Many state policymakers may be unaware of how well-intentioned policies can sometimes make it more difficult for returning adults to complete their degrees.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Established policies can prevent institutions from flexibly meeting needs of non-traditional students.
- Students may have accumulated significant credits toward a specialized degree, such as nursing or teaching, but were unable to complete a final requirement such as a practicum or student teaching.
- Institutional residency requirements can prolong time to degree for ready adults.

Promising strategies:

- **Formal communication processes:** States and institutions can establish formal communication processes between state policymakers and institutional leaders to identify and barriers and disseminate promising strategies.
- **Generalized degrees:** Offering generalized "parachute degrees" that allow students to apply credits earned in pursuit of a specialized major to a more general degree program can increase degree completion and prevent stopouts in the first place.
- **Flexibility to waive policies:** When appropriate, institutions should have the ability to waive certain academic residency requirements.

4. Lack of financial resources—Many of these students originally left college due to limited financial resources and may face the same difficulties upon returning.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Many scholarship/financial aid opportunities are restricted to traditional students.
- Some working adults may not be able to afford full tuition payments at the outset of an academic semester.
- Some ready adults may have financial holds that prevent them from reenrolling.

Promising Strategies:

- **Financial aid policy audits:** States and institutions should analyze financial aid and scholarship opportunities to ensure that there are valid reasons for any programs that are limited to traditional students.
- **Payment plans:** Allowing students to make a monthly payment rather than requiring the full lump sum at the outset of the semester can ease the burden on those who may have cash flow challenges.
- **Flexible employee tuition reimbursement:** Employee tuition reimbursement plans should match the payment schedule required by institutions in order to lessen the burden on students to provide full payment up front.
- **Flexibility and forgiveness:** Providing flexibility, payment plans, or forgiveness can provide an incentive for adults to return to complete their degrees.

5. Limited time to dedicate to college—Returning adults may have significant obligations outside of school and must make the best use of their time in order to complete a degree quickly.

Examples of Barrier in practice:

- Ready adults often work full-time while completing coursework.
- Family obligations can compete with time needed for coursework.

Promising Strategies:

- **Flexible time:** States and institutions can pursue partnerships with employers that offer employees flexible schedules to attend postsecondary classes.
- **Flexible course scheduling:** Institutions should ensure that students have access to all courses they need to complete a degree outside of traditional hours.
- **Flexible schedules for student services:** Students who need courses outside of the traditional times also likely need to access student services, such as advising and institutional business offices outside of regular work hours.

Endnotes

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey, "Sex by Age by Educational Attainment for the Population 18 Years and Over," accessed on 20 February 2012 at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_1YR_B15001&prodType=table.

[2] Paul Turman, "South Dakota Ready Adult Population, State Context and Objectives: A Vision for the Future," PowerPoint presentation, Pierre, SD, 14 May 2009.

Introduction

Since 2008 the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), with funding from Lumina Foundation, has worked with Arkansas, Colorado, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, and South Dakota on a comprehensive effort to increase postsecondary access and success among adult learners. That project, *Non-traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners*, or NTNM, aimed to eliminate state and institutional barriers that hinder "ready adults"—those who have earned a significant number of prior college credits before leaving postsecondary education without earning a degree—from completing their credential.

Ready Adults: *Individuals who have earned a significant number of prior college credits before leaving postsecondary education without earning a credential.*

Improving access and success for these students is important for many reasons. Earning a postsecondary degree has obvious and proven economic benefits for the individual, but raising degree attainment also benefits society as a whole, through improved economic development, greater civic involvement, a stronger workforce, and increased global competitiveness. The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce projects that the percentage of jobs requiring postsecondary education will increase in the coming years, and that by 2018, the country may face a shortfall of at least 3 million degrees (associate's or better) to meet this workforce need.[1] In addition, the recent economic recession has further reinforced the importance of postsecondary education attainment. The gap in unemployment rates between those with and those without degrees widened significantly during the downturn. Between the fourth quarter of 2007 (pre-recession) and the end of 2009, the gap in unemployment rates for those with bachelor's degrees and those with some college but no degree grew from 1.4 to 4 percentage points.[2]

Not surprisingly, college completion and increased degree production have moved to the forefront of discussions about higher education policy in recent years. Lumina Foundation established its "Big Goal" of having 60 percent of the adult population with a postsecondary degree or high-quality certificate by 2025. The Obama Administration also made completion a centerpiece of its higher education efforts, with a slightly different target: having the highest proportion of adults with college degrees or certificates in the world by 2020.[3]

On top of these two ambitious nationwide goals, many states have established their own targets for postsecondary degree and certificate attainment. These goals—such as Colorado's plan to double the number of degrees produced through its state system or Arkansas's pledge to double the total number of degree holders in the state—are strong drivers of state and institutional policies.

While the specifics and timeframes of these goals may differ, one thing is true across the board: none of them will be met by only improving the "traditional" education pipeline. States and institutions will also have to increase the number of adults who earn a postsecondary degree; and among potential adult students, ready adults are the closest to earning a credential. This makes improving their degree completion an efficient path to quickly improving degree attainment levels.

Fortunately, virtually all of the "goal setters" recognize this. The U.S. Department of Education's College Completion Toolkit includes an emphasis on reaching adults with some college but no degree.[3] Lumina Foundation has for several years supported efforts that target adults with significant prior college credits. Additionally, many states have included specific language about the importance of increasing degree production by adult learners in their strategic planning efforts, higher education legislation, or state attainment goals.

Planning for NTNM began in late 2007 in a robust economic climate. Since then, state budgets have suffered as tax revenues plummeted and demand on social service programs skyrocketed. This has made it difficult for higher education agencies and

institutions to maintain current services, let alone focus on new policy initiatives. Nevertheless, as the severity and extent of the downturn grew, the rationale for improving degree completion by adult learners remained strong for two reasons: to meet the workforce demands of the future and to help the unemployed and underemployed develop more marketable skills. The economic challenges that continue to face states and institutions are an opportunity to focus on better serving the unemployed and underemployed; the economic, societal, and individual benefits are more important than ever, particularly now that states have begun a period of recovery. NTNM provided the opportunity for higher education agencies and institutions in six states to focus on changes in policy and practice that can better serve ready adults, as well as highlighting lessons from those states that can help others as they work to increase postsecondary degree completion among adults.

The purpose of these case studies is to provide a comprehensive account of the NTNM effort and an investigation of the lessons learned in each of the project states.

Project Background

WICHE began the project in 2008 by selecting Arkansas, Colorado, and Nevada through a competitive process to receive $65,000 over two years to assist state and institutional leaders in identifying and removing barriers that prevent ready adults from returning to postsecondary education to finish their degrees. With additional support from Lumina in the form of a supplemental grant, WICHE added South Dakota and New Jersey—states that had both submitted strong applications in the original selection process—in 2009. Due to unforeseen budgetary and governance challenges, New Jersey was only able to participate in the project for one year. North Dakota had expressed a statewide commitment to reaching and reengaging returning adults and was able to launch an expedited state project beginning in 2010. As part of the application process, WICHE required all states to form working groups to tackle each of the five areas. State applicants identified state and institutional representatives to populate each working group.

In the first year of the project, the working groups sought to identify the state and institutional barriers that prevent ready adults from completing their degrees. With one statewide meeting facilitated by WICHE and one additional intrastate meeting, the working groups identified numerous issues and challenges. These included difficulties common to all states—such as an inability to locate current contact information for former students and difficulties students face in transferring credits—and challenges specific to individual states, such as policies that limited the amount of debt that state institutions could forgive.

The first step for all project teams was to define their state's target population and, to the extent possible, analyze data on potential ready adults. This information informed discussions about academic affairs, student services, financial aid, communications strategies, and other issues. The project also gave each state the flexibility to define a ready adult in a way that met its needs. In general, the states chose similar definitions, focusing on former students who previously had earned 75 percent of the credits necessary for a degree. Most states focused on potential students working toward either an associate's or bachelor's degree; but in some cases, such as in South Dakota and Colorado, where the two-year institutions are under a separate governance structure, the projects limited their focus to four-year degrees.

The structure of the second year was similar to the first, but the focus shifted to *addressing* the barriers, and the states convened additional intrastate meetings. During this time most states found it useful to reorganize their working group structure. While the initial organization helped identify the challenges, the projects found significant overlap between working group focus areas and reorganized to better address their specific state contexts. For example, Arkansas chose to shift to two groups, one focused on two-year institutions and the other on four-year schools. Colorado combined the student services and financing and financial aid groups and then elected to solicit bids for pilot projects at institutions; those pilot projects in turn served as new working groups. In Nevada, a state with great geographical challenges, the project leaders formed

three regional working groups. These changes reflected the different needs and structures of project states. But the underlying process—close collaboration between state and institutional leaders—remained key for each.

During each year of the project, state teams also participated in a joint meeting that was convened by WICHE to discuss challenges, share innovative solutions, and develop collaborative relationships across state lines to aid their ongoing efforts.

Outcomes and Results

This report does not lay claim to specific numbers of adults who returned and completed their degrees as a result of this project. Few states have the capacity in their data systems to track course completions and degrees obtained by returning adults in general, let alone those who may have been targeted by outreach efforts from the project.

Some institutions involved have reported on the numbers of degrees completed through programs developed as part of this project, but these reports generally include the caveat that many others may have returned without entering a particular degree completion program. Rather than focus on specific numbers, this report emphasizes the improvements in the environment for returning adults and the elimination of barriers that may have prevented them from completing degrees.

Data collection about this population remains a significant challenge. Some states have made progress and now require institutions to gather and report more data about returning adults. Furthermore, initial results in the project states suggest that the environment for returning adults has improved significantly. These are important steps forward and will make it easier for subsequent projects to accurately identify the number of returning adults who complete degrees. WICHE remains committed to following the progress of these states and will monitor outcomes and degree completions in the coming years.

ARKANSAS

The Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) set five main goals for its NTNM effort:

- Define ready adults.
- Identify policy barriers.
- Include ready adults in the statewide data system.
- Create an action plan for improving adult graduation rates.
- Build a statewide system of advocates to help with the implementation of this plan.

With strong statewide leadership and support from institutions and the state legislature, the project has worked to improve the education climate for non-traditional students.

Policy Context

Although Arkansas tends to rank lower than other NTNM states in most education measures, the project happened during a favorable policy environment, with strong support from the governor and legislature. State project leaders took advantage of this, and the lessons and ideas from the state working groups that developed in the first year of the project helped influence several pieces of legislation to remove barriers that hindered the state's ready adults.

Governance. Governance of higher education in Arkansas is highly decentralized. Compared to centralized governing boards in other states, the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board, which is staffed by ADHE, has less power over its institutions. Each of the state's 33 public institutions has its own governing board with operational authority, leaving ADHE to coordinate rather than mandate state policy.[4] In working with institutions on new initiatives such as NTNM, ADHE must build consensus throughout the system to implement measures affecting institutional policies and practice. Still, strong leadership, strategic planning, and support from both the state legislature and the governor, who has long been a champion of adult learners, helped unify institutional interests and allowed the state to set new policies through legislation.

Attainment. Arkansas ranks near the bottom of all states in education outcomes, but the support of the governor and legislature makes achieving its goal of raising the percentage of bachelor's degree holders realistic, if ambitious (see Table 1). Hoping to improve these numbers, the governor established a goal of doubling the number of degree holders in the state by 2025, revising an earlier goal that aimed for 27 percent of adults to have a bachelor's degree by 2015.[5] This target for improvement is designed to be an important determinant of Arkansas's success in meeting the state's workforce needs, generating economic development, and improving its regional and national competitiveness. Due to commitment from the governor's cabinet and a 2007 legislative task force on higher education, there has been broad understanding among state and institutional leaders about the need for increasing degree attainment rates and including non-traditional students in those efforts. In its final report, the task force presented the following recommendation to the governor and the general assembly:

> Encourage students within 25% of graduation to return and complete a degree. Each institution should identify these students, and send letters encouraging them to return. Remove obstacles to graduation (such as graduation fees). A statewide effort, including a media publicity campaign, should be made to contact these students.[6]

As noted in Table 1, 24 percent of Arkansans over the age of 25 have had some college education but have not completed a degree.[7] Effectively targeting this group, which includes the state's ready adults, and making it easier for these potential students to reenroll and earn credentials would result in improved individual economic outcomes and help the state meet its goal of being regionally and nationally competitive.

State budget climate. Although the state faced budget shortfalls during the economic recession, the overall budget picture for higher education in Arkansas was considerably better than in most other states. From FY09 to FY12, higher education actually

Table 1. Arkansas at a Glance

Category	State Results	National Average	State Rank**
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least an associate's degree*	28%	38%	49
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least a bachelor's degree*	21%	30%	48
Percentage of adults 25-64 with some college but no degree*	24%	22%	N/A
State attainment goal***	Doubling the number of Arkansas residents with a postsecondary degree by 2025		
State definition of ready adult	• 75% of credits for two- or four-year degree • 22 years old • 2.0 GPA • Out of school for at least one year		
Data-mining outcomes	Arkansas aggregated data from participating institutions. Updated contact information through a third-party data matching firm		

* U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.
** These rankings do not include Washington, D.C., or Puerto Rico.
*** Gov. Mike Beebe, "State of the State Address, 2011."

received a 1.8 percent budget increase.[8] More significantly, state voters passed a referendum in 2008 authorizing a lottery, with proceeds dedicated to postsecondary scholarships. The state legislature, charged with developing the legislation to enact the voters' will, dedicated 15 percent (since increased to 20 percent) of the projected $105 million in annual scholarship funds to non-traditional learners. This favorable budget situation, along with the windfall of scholarship funds dedicated to non-traditional students, contributed greatly to the success of the NTNM effort in Arkansas.

State Actions

Arkansas's primary successes with respect to NTNM involved the enactment of state-level policies that created incentives for institutions to serve more ready adults. Along with the stimulus of the NTNM grant, solid leadership led to a comprehensive, coordinated statewide initiative to help ready adults return to postsecondary education.

Lottery scholarships. The Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarship (informally known as "the Lottery Scholarship"), a merit-based scholarship program, is the most significant change in the Arkansas higher education landscape over the last several years. While the NTNM project had little to do with its statewide passage, it did influence how it was implemented. State lawmakers, with significant input from ADHE staff, set aside 15 percent of the fund (later increased to 20 percent) for non-traditional students.[9] In the 2010-11 academic year the state provided scholarships to almost 5,000 non-traditional students.[10] The state's high-level focus on ready adults was integral in making non-traditional students a key target group for the scholarship.

The long and deliberate process of cultivating statewide advocates influenced the inclusion of non-traditional students in the scholarship legislation. State legislators who participated in the higher education task force were aware of the issues facing ready adults. These same legislators were important members of the ad hoc lottery legislation committee and reinforced ADHE's message about the importance of ready adults in reaching Arkansas's educational attainment goals.

Further, ADHE staff worked with the ad hoc committee of state legislators to develop the scholarship program and ensure that non-traditional students were included in the program. ADHE refined the broad legislative definition of a "non-traditional student," drawing in part on the earlier work by the project team to define ready adults.[11]

Other financial aid changes. The state also adjusted several other state-funded financial aid programs to benefit ready adult students. The GO! Opportunity Grant, the state's need-based aid program, awards up to $1,000 to eligible students. From its inception in 2007, only traditional-aged students could receive the funds. In 2009 the legislature made it available to students of all ages. With this change the state also significantly increased funding for the program, from $5.4 million to $11 million in 2009. The state's Workforce Improvement Grant program, a need-based aid program for working adults, also received increased funding, growing from $3.7 million to $4.3 million; and it can now be used for costs beyond tuition, including books and daycare. In addition,

$175,000 was earmarked annually for the Single Parent Scholarship Fund, which is managed by a statewide foundation.

These changes, in combination with the lottery scholarship program, are projected to grant adults at least an additional $140 million in scholarship aid between 2010 and 2020, which will likely lead to significant increases in the number of ready adults returning to and graduating from postsecondary education.

Marketing and communications. To improve Arkansas's outreach to ready adults, project participants established the Public Information Officer Council, consisting of key communications staff from postsecondary institutions. The council worked with ADHE to develop a statewide marketing and communication plan targeting ready adults, using funds from the state lottery. Meanwhile, institutions and ADHE have committed to leveraging existing marketing campaigns to include messaging to potential adult students.

ADHE also worked with the Arkansas Department of Workforce Services (DWS) to send letters to recently unemployed Arkansans, explaining rule changes in federal and state unemployment insurance laws that would make it easier for them to go back to school. As part of the agency's regular communications with the unemployed, the letters encouraged these individuals to enhance their skills by returning to college. DWS sent 70,000 letters on August 1, 2009, and continued to mail additional letters in the following weeks.

Consortium of adult-ready institutions. ADHE worked with several state institutions to create a consortium of two- and four-year institutions that are particularly adult-friendly. As a condition of membership in the consortium, these institutions conducted an audit of their current policies and practices and how they affect adult students using materials from the Center for Adult and Experiential Learning (see box below). The process helped them analyze how they serve adult learners. As a result they worked to develop solutions for identifying policy barriers and implement promising institutional-level practices. For example, consortium members have named a single staff member as point of contact—an "adult student concierge"—for inquiries from adult students. Those staffers were trained by ADHE in how to best assist adult students.

For more information about the concierge or single point of contact model, visit
wiche.edu/info/publications/ntnmConciergeBrief.pdf

ADHE staff and institutional leaders collaborated as part of the NTNM project to develop a step-by-step description of the matriculation process, with a time frame and benchmarks for both two- and four-year institutions. This description delineated all

CAEL's Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Tools

Arkansas and South Dakota both provided funds for state institutions to administer the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) surveys developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). The surveys have two parts: an institutional self-assessment survey and an adult learner inventory. The two pieces are complementary, as the adult learner inventory provides faculty and staff with student perceptions on how well the institution serves adults. CAEL analyzes the data and provides reports back to the institutions, highlighting areas where there is a mismatch between the institution's and students' perceptions of services. The ALFI tools provide a framework of policies and practices to make educational programs more attractive and accessible to adult learners. The tools help pinpoint both the institution's strengths and areas for improvement.

Institutions received quantified feedback about areas where students felt they were not being well-served and were able to focus attention and resources on making improvements.

The ALFI report gives institutions:

- A detailed campus report on the findings from both the institutional self assessment and the student surveys.
- Comparative data on how the perceptions of adult students match up to the perceptions of faculty and administration.
- National benchmarking data to compare an institution's results with institutions serving adults nationwide.

For more information visit
www.cael.org/alfi.htm

necessary steps to move a student from enrollment to graduation and assigned responsibility for each step. Consortium institutions examined and modified the process to focus on their role in moving non-traditional students to graduation.

Understanding existing services. Arkansas undertook multiple efforts to assess existing services for returning adults. State institutions implemented student surveys and self-assessments using CAEL's Adult Learner Focused Institution tools (see box, previous page).

State leadership also encouraged "secret shopper" evaluations by calling institutional admissions offices to assess how they would handle adults interested in returning to complete their degrees.

ADHE data efforts. The project team in Arkansas, like those in other NTNM states, worked to analyze available data on its ready adults. Arkansas could not extract data on former students from its statewide database but instead aggregated student information from participating institutions. These records did not have up-to-date contact information, making it difficult to determine if the potential students still lived or worked in Arkansas.

Virtually all states, regardless of the completeness of their state data systems, faced this challenge. Arkansas's project team initially sought cooperation from other state agencies to attempt data matches to provide up-to-date contact information. Ultimately, bureaucratic difficulties hindered the success of this approach, leading ADHE to partner with Acxiom Corporation, a private-sector data aggregator, to match the agency's list of former students with current demographic information. This collaboration has proven extremely successful and cost-effective, allowing Arkansas to obtain current contact information for most of the ready adults that the team identified at a relatively low cost. Based on the positive outcomes in Arkansas, the project teams in North Dakota and South Dakota also partnered with Acxiom (see box on p. 31 for more information). While it may raise privacy concerns for some, this information is publicly available and regularly used by marketers in other economic sectors. The state team took care to abide by all relevant Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations.

ADHE made efforts to improve other sources of data on the adult population. For instance, in 2010 ADHE began to disaggregate data on adult students in the institutions' accountability reports. It also now publishes additional data reports that highlight the progress of adult students, using its unit record data system. This move was designed to bring more attention to the prominence and performance of all non-traditional students in Arkansas's higher education system. Accessible and user-friendly data will help the agency keep state policymakers focused on the non-traditional population and further efforts to eliminate barriers that prevent this group from reenrolling and earning degrees.

What Worked

The following sections highlight the key successes of the NTNM effort in Arkansas.

Project goals. Arkansas made significant progress in achieving its project goals. The project team defined ready adults; received valuable guidance and feedback from strong institutional leaders; recruited high-profile individuals in the governor's office, the legislature, and elsewhere to serve as advocates for adults in higher education; and with these advocates, made many changes to remove barriers that prevent ready adults from completing their degrees. ADHE also has taken important steps to improve the data available on adult learners as part of an effort to include their needs in long-term planning and policymaking.

Lottery scholarships. The passage of the Academic Challenge Scholarship and the specific inclusion of non-traditional students will provide lasting benefits for ready adults—an impressive accomplishment in an environment of budget cuts. Although the lottery and resultant scholarship were approved by voters independently from the NTNM project, ADHE still worked through the legislative process to specifically include non-traditional students in the enacting legislation. The agency accomplished this by cultivating key state legislators who participated in the Task Force on Higher Education Remediation, Retention, and Graduation Rates and keeping them apprised of the initiative. The lottery also

provides funding to inform the population about available resources for degree completion, which allowed ADHE to launch a statewide outreach campaign aimed at ready adults. ADHE hopes that its communications campaign and new scholarship money will attract ready adults and bring them back to college to finish their degrees.

It is important to note, however, that the financial aid strategies implemented in Arkansas to serve non-traditional students were unique to its context and may not universally apply to other states. There are legitimate arguments that would prevent the creation of a multitude of disjointed financial aid programs targeted to special populations and other legitimate arguments that would lead to the creation of financial aid programs that incentivize students to attend postsecondary education full-time. Any financial aid strategy that a state adopts needs to be deliberate and strategic in its goals and methods. At the same time, it is important to consider how any approach would impact the growing population of non-traditional learners.

Intrastate partnerships. ADHE partnered successfully with other state agencies, such as the Department of Workforce Services, to reach out to adults who were out of work, a key segment of the ready adult population. The partnership greatly reduced the cost and allowed ADHE to take advantage of already existing state programs. Other efforts to partner with state agencies to share and use data have not yet proven successful.

State legislation. During the course of the NTNM project, Arkansas enacted a series of laws that benefit ready adults by addressing some of the barriers that can make it more difficult for them to reenroll. For example, Act 182 of 2009 made it easier to transfer credits from two- to four-year institutions and from one public university to another.[12] All states have noted that transfer is a significant barrier for ready adults trying to complete their degrees. Other new laws seek to improve remediation at public higher education institutions (Act 971 of 2009) and to expand scholarships to adult students (Act 1213 of 2009).[13]

Locating former students. As noted, Arkansas partnered with a private firm to find current contact information for former students who met the state system's definition of a ready adult. With this information, institutions can more effectively target their marketing messages and develop personalized appeals to reengage these adults. This partnership has proven highly cost-effective and been duplicated in several other states.

Single point of contact for returning adults. Borrowing from the NTNM effort in Nevada, Arkansas institutions adopted the practice of identifying a specific individual at its institutions who is tasked with helping to guide adults through the complex admissions and enrollment process.

Ongoing Challenges

While the legislative and policy changes will dramatically improve the environment for ready adults, Arkansas still faces several significant challenges in continuing to engage these potential students and help them earn degrees.

Comprehensive institutional involvement. The Arkansas effort could have benefited from more comprehensive institutional engagement. The core planning team included representatives from 18 of the 33 two- and four-year institutions in the state. In hindsight, this team could have been more successful at the institutional level if more institutions had been actively engaged. Securing this institutional buy-in would have further strengthened the project's sustainability and led to a greater examination of institutional policies and practices that are barriers to ready adults.

Improved data systems. The inability of Arkansas's data system to identify the state's ready adults without aggregating the information from the institutions is a barrier to reengaging them. One goal of this initiative was to improve Arkansas's statewide data system, but the project was not able to accomplish this. With the additional federal money flowing into data systems through the federal stimulus legislation, ADHE received a significant statewide data system grant. As part of this opportunity, the state may be better able to track former students and adults who have returned to school.

Summary

The Arkansas NTNM project was centered mostly on the state level and was effective in bringing about significant policy and legislative changes. With the long-term engagement of the governor, the previous state higher education executive officer, and key state legislators, the state has enacted systemic and far-reaching changes. The lottery scholarships and the relatively healthy budget situation contributed greatly to this success, but credit should also go to the advocates for adult learners in the ADHE office, the governor's office, and the state legislature, who recognized the importance of engaging adults.

Many of the changes the state implemented, such as rewriting the laws for existing state aid and improving the state transfer policies, did not require additional resources but rather relied on political will and coalition-building coordination. While it is true that this initiative benefited from a fertile climate for policy change, the concerted dedication of leaders allowed the state to take advantage of that environment. The project also took initial steps to identify and eliminate policy and practice barriers at the institutional level, but significant work here remains to be done. The NTNM effort in Arkansas shows that even in a decentralized, power-sharing environment, dedicated leaders can create significant changes with long-lasting benefits.

COLORADO

The Colorado Department of Higher Education's (CDHE's) goals in the NTNM project were to:

- Stimulate discussion about the ready adult population.
- Identify barriers.
- Change policy and practice to increase adult learners' access, persistence, and completion of higher education.

The project team leveraged funds from another grant to launch pilot programs targeting ready adults at three institutions. Disseminating and implementing the lessons learned during these programs are key to the state's long-term efforts to increase access and success for adult learners.

Policy Context

In general, Colorado has a decentralized governance structure for higher education. Often referred to as the "Colorado Paradox," the state has a relatively high degree attainment rate, but data suggest this is due more to in-migration of educated workers rather than strong degree production by the state's education system. To help address this problem, and recognizing the decentralized nature of the higher education in the state, project leaders leveraged funds from a separate grant to offer subgrants to institutions to target ready adults in order to achieve project goals.

Governance. Like Arkansas, governance of higher education in Colorado is highly decentralized, with authority distributed among 10 institutional governing boards.[14] CDHE, serving as staff for the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, coordinates statewide policy.[15] Like ADHE in Arkansas, CDHE could not simply mandate new policies or institutional practice but instead attempted to build support among institutions for efforts to reengage ready adults. Two-year institutions are governed by the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education.[16] CDHE made efforts to engage these institutions but response was limited.

In 2010 Colorado adopted a statewide strategic plan for higher education that includes language recommending that the state better serve adult learners.[17] This commitment may help the state sustain its efforts to reach and reengage ready adults.

Attainment. Colorado's attainment level is high compared to other states (see Table 2). Its high overall attainment rates are due in part to in-migration of educated residents from other states. In 2007 Colorado had the sixth highest in-migration rate of young adults (age 22-39) with at least an associate's degree.[18]

Even with this relatively high attainment ranking, the state has established an aggressive goal for further boosting overall education attainment. At the direction of former Governor Bill Ritter, the state's new higher education strategic plan seeks to double the number of degrees and certificates by 2020. However, even if Colorado is able to improve the state's traditional education pipeline outcomes, such as high school graduation rates and college-

Table 2. Colorado at a Glance

Category	State Results	National Average	State Rank**
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least an associate's degree*	46%	38%	2
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least a bachelor's degree*	37%	30%	5
Percentage of adults 25-64 with some college but no degree*	23%	22%	N/A
State attainment goal***	Double the production of degrees and certificates by 2020		
Definition of ready adult	• 25 years old or older • 2.5 GPA • Completed 75% of the credits necessary for a degree		
Data-mining outcomes	Successfully mined its statewide student database and identified 12,457 student who left a state school from 2002-2006 and met the definition of "ready adult"		

* U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.
** These rankings do not include Washington, DC, or Puerto Rico.
***Colorado's Strategic Plan for Higher Education.

going rates, to match the top-performing states (a highly unrealistic assumption), the state will still fall short of the governor's goal—unless it produces a significantly greater number of degrees from its adult population.[19]

State budget climate. As it did in most states, the economic downturn of recent years severely impacted Colorado. Higher education, however, has faced longstanding budgetary challenges due to a combination of circumstances unique to the state. One of the state's funding challenges stems from a constitutional amendment known as the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR), which voters adopted in 1992.[20] It limits revenue growth for state and local governments—including revenues from tuition—and requires voter approval for any state or local tax increase.[21] Because of the referendum and its tuition provision, Colorado cut state funding to higher education by more than 22 percent from 2002 to 2005.[22]

Subsequent legislation helped higher education institutions avoid the budget-shrinking impacts of the amendment by implementing a voucher-based system for state tuition aid. While it accomplished this, the voucher appears to also negatively impact student access, particularly among adults.[23]

Although federal stimulus funds helped fill in the reductions to higher education funding that were a result of the most recent recession, the state still faces significant budget difficulties. From FY09 to FY12, state support for higher education dropped by more than 5 percent.[24] While state support has continued to decline, voters have recently shown support for higher education by loosening restrictions on state gambling and devoting 78 percent of the resulting new tax revenue to community colleges, which is expected to generate $7 million to $10 million annually for the schools.[25]

Overall, the funding picture for higher education in Colorado has not been a pretty story. State funding for higher education in Colorado has dropped by more than 30 percent under the restrictions imposed by TABOR.[26] This longstanding funding challenge, coupled with the economic recession has made it difficult for some institutions to launch new efforts to target potential students.

State Actions

Colorado's data working group identified all former students of public postsecondary institutions who attended between 2002 and 2006 but did not graduate and were no longer enrolled. Based on the state's definition of a ready adult, the group culled this list of 136,158 to just over 12,400. There have been concerns, however, about the accuracy of this data, discussed in greater detail below.

Leveraging other state grants—Lumina's Making Opportunity Affordable funds, along with money from the Statewide Office of Extended Studies—to augment the NTNM project, CDHE solicited proposals from institutions, asking them to address the barriers identified by the five project working groups to help ready adults return and complete their degrees. The state also provided all institutions with a list of their former students. The project team chose this approach, with institutions piloting new projects, due in part to CDHE's limited authority over institutions.

Nineteen four-year institutions submitted proposals (although two-year institutions were eligible, none applied) and CDHE selected three institutions: University of Colorado at Boulder; Metropolitan State College of Denver (Metro State), which is now called Metropolitan State University of Denver; and Adams State College. Each received a $25,000 grant, which ran from March to December of 2009. Among the suggested activities for grantees were:

- Providing comprehensive counseling.
- Establishing a single point of contact to help students reenroll.
- Developing and testing strategic outreach and communications plans.
- Providing wraparound services, such as child care and flexible support hours.
- Developing institutional leadership in support of ready adults.
- Balancing academic standards with policies that speed degree completion.
- Collecting more data on why students drop out of college and what will help them finish.

University of Colorado at Boulder. The University of Colorado (CU) at Boulder used its grant to initiate the CU Complete program, which entails:

- Implementing a concierge to serve as a single point of contact for ready adults who are interested in reenrolling.
- Contacting former CU students on CDHE's list of ready adults.
- Launching a communications campaign.

While CU carried out these tasks, it also identified additional barriers to reenrollment and made plans to use the findings to create a degree-completion program. The pilot leveraged its small grant with free media exposure in newspapers and local TV newscasts, which led numerous people to contact the institution about the program and inquire about degree completion possibilities. The project also used the list of former students it received from CDHE and contacted more than 1,000 former students with postcards. As of November 2011, 36 had completed degrees and more than 80 were enrolled. CU has sustained the program following the end of its subgrant.[27] Twelve additional students were projected to graduate through this program in May 2012.[28]

Through this project CU was able to examine how it works with adult students and reevaluate its approaches to serving with this population within a research university. The project has also helped build leadership and support for adult learners. The chancellor at CU supports the program and helped engage faculty and leadership outside the continuing education system. The dean of the continuing education program has been heavily involved. The school has also added a full-time position to oversee the program and work with returning adults.

Metro State. Metro State makes serving adult students a core part of its mission. As part its CDHE-funded grant project, the school created an effort called, "Come Back to Your Future," which includes:

- Contacting former students on the list generated by CDHE.
- Conducting a thorough needs assessment for these students.
- Providing support services to help them overcome common barriers.
- Establishing a reentry concierge for returning students.

The program encourages students to design their own majors through the Individualized Degree Program, which can speed their progress toward a degree because of its flexible degree requirements and ability to match up to student interests.

In addition to creating a concierge for student reenrollment, Metro State has established a one-stop retention office, where students can seek help with anything from healthcare and childcare to tutoring. The continuing studies office also helps returning adult students access college support services, such as on-campus daycare, flexible coursework scheduling, counseling, and emergency funds that can help cover costs not paid for by other programs—a practice that has proven effective at other institutions to help non-traditional students stay enrolled when facing unexpected expenses.

Of the 3,000 former Metro State students who CDHE identified, about 600 already had a bachelor's degree and started but did not finish their second degree. One former student had already fulfilled the requirements for a degree but did not know it. Metro State sent postcards to 2,012 ready adults who attended the institution at one time but did not earn a degree. About 600 addresses were out of date. Metro State sought to contact these students by telephone these students. The program has reenrolled 50 students in its initial effort.

Metro State identified unpaid balances as a significant factor in preventing some ready adults from reenrolling. At Metro State, if a student has an unpaid balance that has been sent to collections, he or she is not allowed to reenroll without paying off that balance and paying his or her full tuition up front. Also, due to state fiscal rules, Metro State cannot erase any debt of more than $50, so it cannot start an amnesty or debt forgiveness program, which presents a sizable barrier to students who lack thousands of dollars to restart their education. Although this is part of the state fiscal rules, individual institutional boards can

override the policy. To date they have not taken action on this item.[29]

Similar to many institutions, Metro State found that the math requirement is a challenge for many returning adult students. All students must pass a basic math course to graduate, and they must test into that math course with a placement exam. Many ready adults have not studied math in many years. If they fail the placement test, they may need up to five semesters of remedial coursework to complete the requirement. Understanding that returning adults may fare poorly on the placement exam due to having atrophied college-level math skills, Metro State offers tutoring to help them prepare. Although tutoring had been available before, many returning adults were not aware of it. The reentry coordinator now highlights these opportunities. Also, Metro State is enlisting local nonprofit organizations to provide additional tutoring.

The Metro State pilot program has developed into a sustained degree completion program. The school's reentry coordinator is now a regular position and has continued to address barriers that keep ready adults from returning and completing degrees. The Metro State degree completion program received another CDHE grant and established a scholarship program for returning adults, as well as the previously mentioned emergency fund.

Although sample sizes are small, initial results suggest that the scholarship is effective at retaining students. Thirty-five of 36 scholarship recipients (97 percent) returned following their first semester, compared to a retention rate of 67 percent of the 818 students who only met regularly with the reentry coordinator.[30] All of the remaining scholarship recipients have graduated or will do so by the end of the 2011-12 academic year.[31] While the retention rate for those who did not receive scholarships is lower, further study is needed to compare it to retention rates for all returning students.

The reentry coordinator and the degree completion office have spent significant time interacting with these students and have offered several recommendations to help remove additional barriers.

- *Create a general studies bachelor's degree*. According to the reentry coordinator, most students wanted to earn a degree quickly and were less concerned with the specific major.
- *Offer additional class-scheduling options*. Although Metro State includes adults as part of its core mission, returning students needed more course-scheduling flexibility, including more night and weekend options, to accommodate employment and family obligations. Some courses required for their degree completion were not available outside of the "traditional" schedule.
- *Provide mandatory advising at credit benchmarks and improved cross-training of advising staff*. Returning students often felt they did not receive effective advising in their earlier academic endeavors and were unaware of several basic degree requirements and financial aid opportunities. With improved training in different areas for advisors, students could receive information about financial aid, degree requirements, career services, and academic advising from one source.[32]

The project activities at Metro State have grown beyond the initial scope of the subgrant. The school has revised its academic advising programs to make sure all students are aware of degree requirements (particularly math) and given the necessary support to meet the requirements. The institution believes this will decrease the number of students who earn large numbers of credits without completing all of the necessary requirements for a degree.[33]

In collaboration with CDHE, Metro State also revised its math placement policy, making the path to meeting the requirement shorter and more logical, and has started a support group for adult students entering math courses.[34]

The institution also carried out a study of current students with large amounts of credit, many of whom stopped out at some point during their academic careers. The study identified significant financial aid obstacles for these students, as many are losing or have lost eligibility for state programs. The study recommended creating a full-time position for a college completion specialist to

work directly with these high-credit, no-degree students.[35]

The Center for Individualized Learning is also continuing to develop an alternative degree path that would look similar to a bachelor of general studies or the bachelor of university studies.[36]

Adams State College. Adams State College worked on two fronts in its pilot program. First, it created a degree-completion program called, "FINISH!" that included:

- Targeting ready adults identified by CDHE.
- Auditing institutional records to identify and contact former students who were close to degrees but not enrolled.
- Creating and offering a preparation course for placement tests to help ready adult students brush up on their skills and avoid remediation.

The project team found that 7 percent of the former Adams State students had already received their degrees since CDHE compiled the list. The school continued to contact others to encourage them to come back to complete their degrees. The school planned to filter its list through the National Student Clearinghouse every semester to identify former students who reenrolled or completed degrees at other institutions. Adams State found it challenging to train its student support service personnel to answer questions about transfer policies and financial aid for both traditional students and adult learners.

Adams State also conducted a survey of ready adults on the list developed by CDHE to examine why these students left school and what programs and services might encourage them to return. The survey ran into significant difficulties, as 77 percent of survey respondents reported that they had already graduated. Given that other states in the NTNM effort and other pilot projects within Colorado have reported significantly lower numbers, the figure from Adams State may be due to difficulties in conducting a telephone-based survey with a highly mobile population, or other unexplained anomalies. Still, this does underscore the importance of filtering lists of former students obtained through data mining through the National Student Clearinghouse to eliminate those who may have graduated from other institutions.

Among respondents who had not yet graduated, the survey found that the top three reasons for leaving college were financial hardship, family responsibilities, and taking time off with plans to return.[37]

After completing the pilot phase, Adams State elected to discontinue its intensive degree-completion efforts, partly because of its findings suggesting substantial errors in the data provided by CDHE and partly because the program was not achieving expected results.

What Worked

Results from the NTNM effort in Colorado and promising practices included the following.

Increased awareness. By engaging public higher education institutions (not just the state higher education agency), the NTNM project raised institutional awareness about the importance of serving ready adults and how to better serve them. Each institution in the pilot considered the barriers and the assistance it can provide to ready adults.

Leveraging of additional funds. The NTNM initiative leveraged additional grant funds to target ready adults. CDHE used funds from Lumina Foundation's Making Opportunity Affordable grant, along with money from the Statewide Office of Extended Studies, to augment the NTNM project. This allowed three institutions to implement pilot projects to serve adult learners. Not all pilot projects have been sustained, which underscores the importance of state and institutional commitment beyond just providing initial funding.

Appropriate use of pilot projects. Given the limits on state authority over postsecondary institutions, creating the pilot projects was an effective way to ensure that some concrete action was taken to improve the learning environment for ready adults. Two of the three institutions selected have sustained the programs they launched with the grant funds; however, the lessons they learned have not been actively disseminated throughout the rest of the public higher education system in the state.

Ongoing Challenges

Colorado faces several challenges in its efforts to sustain and improve its programs serving ready adults.

Find more champions. One of the state's main challenges is to convince the faculty and staff at institutions and state government leaders that adult learners are a priority. The state needs to create institutional and legislative leaders who champion ready adults and the support systems they need. The pilot projects at CU and Metro State benefited from having strong institutional champions already in place, and these pilot programs have now been sustained beyond the original grant period. To develop this leadership at other institutions, the state must expand the types of policymakers included in the initiative and bring in ready adults to share their stories with the state teams and other stakeholders. To build momentum and interest, leaders should use communication professionals to tap the media's natural interest in the human-interest angle to the policy story.

Ensure accuracy of data-mining efforts. While CDHE believed it had identified 12,400 ready adults in its data system, Adam State's survey raised questions about how many may have already graduated. This finding bears further examination as other institutions in the state and other state projects have not encountered similar results. One step states and institutions can take to alleviate this is to filter their data through the National Student Clearinghouse before contacting students in order to more efficiently target resources.

Scale up the effort to involve all institutions. Colorado needs to scale up this effort by including the entire state higher education system. The state planned to scale up participation through peer mentoring and the expansion of pilot programs with additional funds but was unable to secure the money. CDHE should continue to try to engage all the institutions in the state and emphasize that ready adults are a priority to Colorado. It is especially vital that the community colleges are brought on board. While CDHE does not oversee two-year colleges, these institutions will attract many of the returning adults, and they must be integrated into the initiative. While CDHE tried to recruit two-year colleges to submit proposals for the pilot projects (and did not receive any applications that fulfilled the requirements), attempts to engage community colleges must continue.

Focus on statewide policy. The Colorado NTNM initiative did not result in any statewide policy change. This was due in part to the CDHE's lack of governance power. But even without such authority, CDHE can push for changes in the legislature and through regulations. Statewide policy changes are an important part of a comprehensive initiative addressing ready adults, and Colorado could initiate this process by carrying out a policy audit focused on how state policies impact this population.

The state's strategic plan for higher education included the general recommendation to serve the adult population better by providing improved student support services and allowing for greater use of individualized degree pathways. Implementing actual programs based on the work of the NTNM pilot projects and following through on the strategic plan's recommendations could improve adult degree completion statewide.

Summary

Colorado, with its decentralized higher education governance structure, was moderately effective in leveraging other funding sources to boost the impact of the NTNM effort through subgrants. The state used the knowledge developed through the NTNM process along with other funding sources to help several institutions make improvements in their efforts to serve ready adults. But wide-ranging reforms will depend on continued efforts to develop a network of advocates for adult learners throughout the state government.

With the completion agenda gaining prominence, there may be similar opportunities for other states with decentralized governance to follow the subgrant approach. Notably, at least one of Colorado's pilot projects was not sustained. While this is certainly a risk with any new grant-based program, states should include stringent requirements in grant plans for recipients to develop realistic and robust plans for sustainability.

In addition, while the state's data-mining effort seems to have produced usable results, the survey conducted by Adams State called this into question. Colorado's situation highlights the difficulties states have in trying to use their data systems in novel ways. Data-mining successes in other states suggest this is still a useful strategy for improving adult degree completion. The work by other pilot projects in the state provided useful templates for action by institutions across the state that were not heavily involved in the project.

NEVADA

The Nevada System of Higher Education's (NSHE) goals in the NTNM project were to:

- Establish a process for identifying ready adults.
- Eliminate myths about institutional and state policy barriers for ready adults.
- Identify real policy barriers to ready adult success.
- Create new policies that contribute to adult success.

With close collaboration between state higher education officials and institutional leaders, the Nevada effort made significant progress in improving the policy and practice environment for ready adults.

Policy Context

Few states were more impacted by the recent recession than Nevada, which was forced to dramatically cut state support for higher education. Compared to Colorado and Arkansas, Nevada has a much more centralized governance structure, which enabled significant policy changes at the system level. These policy changes eliminated barriers preventing adults from returning and allowed institutions to build pathways to success.

Governance. Nevada has a consolidated and relatively centralized postsecondary governance structure.[38] The publicly elected Nevada Board of Regents has statutory authority to set policies, review programs, and submit consolidated budget recommendations for the state's eight public institutions, including three four-year institutions, four community colleges, and a research institute.[39] Unlike Arkansas and Colorado, the Nevada Board of Regents has wide-ranging authority to implement binding institutional policies.

Attainment. Nevada lags behind other states in most measures of higher education outcomes, ranking 47th in the percentage of adults with associate's and bachelor's degrees (see Table 3).[40] Although the number of jobs requiring postsecondary education is expected to grow, Nevada will still rank near the bottom nationally. The state is projected to rank 48th in the percentage of jobs requiring bachelor's degree and 43rd in jobs requiring an associate's degree in 2018.[41]

To meet the state's goal of increasing degree production by more than a thousand degrees per year, Nevada will likely have to include an aggressive focus on reaching ready adults. Nevada has a relatively high number of adults in the "some college, no degree" category. Although not all of these students are close to a degree, many may fall into the "ready adult" category; bringing them back to college could be an efficient way for the state to boost overall attainment levels.

Table 3. Nevada at a Glance

Category	State Results	National Average	State Rank**
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least an associate's degree*	30%	38%	47
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least a bachelor's degree*	22%	30%	47
Percentage of adults 25-64 with some college but no degree*	27%	22%	N/A
State attainment goal***	Increase postsecondary completers (degrees and certificates) by 1,064 over the current baseline projections each year through 2020		
Definition of ready adult	• Is over 25 • Has earned at least a 2.0 GPA while in college • Has attended school within the last 10 years (or the last five years for two-year, degree-seeking students) but not during the past year • Did not attend an out-of-state institution • Has no financial, disciplinary, or academic holds on their records		
Data-mining outcomes	Identified 21,278 former students of two- and four-year institutions that met the definition of ready adult; more than 19,000 of these were former community college students		

* U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.
** These rankings do not include Washington, D.C., or Puerto Rico.
***Nevada System of Higher Education, *Complete College Nevada.*

Nevada faces a challenge in promoting the importance of bachelor's degrees, ranking in the bottom half of all states in economic return to an individual for earning a degree.[42] The state ranks sixth on the return gained by earning an associate's degree, however.[43] The disparity may reflect the prevalence of lower-skilled jobs in the gaming and mining sectors. The state's overall attainment would be significantly worse if not for migration, as Nevada had the highest rate of in-migration of bachelor degree holders in the country prior to the recent recession.[44] The economic difficulties in the state have likely slowed this in-migration.

State budget climate. The financial outlook for higher education in Nevada is particularly challenging. The state has been hit harder than most by the economic downturn, and higher education budgets have faced greater cuts than other sectors. From FY09 to FY12, higher education funding in Nevada was cut by 24 percent.[45]

Increases in enrollment have accompanied these budget cuts; the economic downturn may have driven Nevada residents back to school. Enrollment in state institutions grew 9 percent from the fall semester in 2007 to the fall semester in 2010. This pressure has ebbed slightly; enrollment declined by 6 percent from 2010 to 2011.[46]

The large budget cuts and unexpectedly high enrollments have been daunting challenges for NSHE and the state's public institutions. Despite this challenging climate, most of the public institutions were eager to participate in this project and have sustained the NTNM effort. Staff shortages due to the budget situation have hindered some ongoing activities, but many other promising practices have been institutionalized and will help Nevada serve ready adults for years to come.

State Actions

Project leaders began by agreeing to a definition of ready adult (see Table 3). Through a combination of statewide and institutional data systems, NSHE staff then developed a list of 21,278 former system students who met that state definition. NSHE provided each state institution with a list of the students that attended that school most recently.

Through the original working groups that were established during the project's first year, NSHE staff and institutional leaders collaboratively identified numerous state-level policy barriers. NSHE and the Nevada Board of Regents then worked to overcome these barriers, where feasible. For example, NSHE proposed (and the board approved) revisions to state policies on credit for prior learning. The revised policy increases the number of acceptable tests for awarding college credit, makes the policy applicable to all institutions, and requires state institutions to accept prior learning credit granted

The Concierge Model

The reenrollment process can be complicated for returning adults. As they attempt to reenroll or transfer credits, they lack the support structure of traditional high school students, who may have better access to advisors, counselors, and peers undergoing the same process. Other states in the NTNM effort also instituted changes in the admissions process to provide returning adults with a single point of contact.

Nevada, which originated the idea among NTNM states, has called their reentry counselors "concierges," which fits with the state's tourism- and hospitality-based economy. These concierges may not be able to solve every problem that ready adults face, but they can direct the returning student to the right person and help smooth the process. From the institution's perspective, this can be an efficient way to improve services to all students as other admissions staff can be freed from the responsibility of serving a population that may require more time and effort while the concierge develops the contacts and institutional knowledge to remove barriers to ready adults' reentry.

The model has been implemented in some form in all five other NTNM states. Many other states and institutions not involved in the NTNM effort have developed similar programs. Successful programs have developed a feedback loop that allows these key staff to engage institutional and system leaders on potential policy and practice changes that can remove systemic barriers.

For more information, see WICHE's brief on the concierge model at

wiche.edu/info/publications/ntnmConciergeBrief.pdf

by other institutions. Previously, state policy granted significant discretion on prior learning to institutions, resulting in inconsistent policies across the state.

The board also improved, at NSHE's recommendation, its policy on deferred payment, delegating most decisions to institutions. Prior to the NTNM discussions that took place in the first year of the project, institutions were prohibited from offering flexible payment plan options to students, and all tuition payments and fees were to be paid in three installments due by mid-October. Project participants identified this as a significant barrier for returning adults. Now institutions are given the flexibility to offer payment plan options suited for each institution's population, provided all payments are received by the end of the semester or end of the course, whichever is earlier.

Notably, NSHE and the institutions developed and launched the concierge model (see box on p. 20), with a single point of contact at each public institution, to help ready adults navigate the reentry process. This idea spread to other states involved in the NTNM effort.

Nevada also worked to develop a statewide marketing campaign despite having limited funds for college outreach and marketing. NSHE responded to this financial challenge by working closely with institutions to create a cobranded statewide outreach campaign called, "Don't Wait, Graduate!" targeting potential students across the state. The state developed a website with contact information for reentry concierges at all institutions and information to guide returning adults through the readmission process.

In Nevada geography is a significant challenge, with two major population centers and sparsely populated rural areas. To reflect this reality, the Nevada NTNM team decided to reorganize its original working groups by geographical area during the second year of the project. This regional approach allowed regular meetings and facilitated close cooperation and collaboration between institutions. The relationships between institutional leaders were a key component of Nevada's success in the project.

Southern region. The southern region working group consisted of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), Nevada State College, and the College of Southern Nevada (CSN). The group created a pilot project to work with Las Vegas firefighters hoping to earn their degrees. The Las Vegas Fire & Rescue department instituted rules requiring firefighters to hold at least an associate's degree and earn more advanced degrees for promotion. But a lack of clear prior learning assessment policies was a significant barrier for these students: firefighters with many years of experience were required to take entry-level fire science classes to fulfill degree requirements. As a result of the pilot that worked to resolve these types of issues, numerous firefighters enrolled in degree programs and several have completed degrees.

The challenges in working with the firefighters have been very similar to those seen in many programs for ready adult learners. Many firefighters do not want to take basic writing and math classes because they already use these skills on the job. They may have credits from many years ago that could be considered outdated, or "stale," and they want credit for their prior learning. They want conveniently located classes and schedule flexibility, and they want a degree as soon as possible.

To address these issues, the institutions developed a coherent way to assess prior learning for both stale credits and on-the-job training and experience. In developing solutions, institutions sought to maintain the academic rigor desired by faculty and required by accreditation. UNLV and CSN allow firefighters to attend classes in their down time, offering classes at the fire-training college. Through the pilot process, the southern group has identified the core elements of coordinated employer- and institution-based concierge programs for ready adults. The institutions have established a network of contacts who communicate closely with an advisor at the fire department.

In addition to participating in the pilot, UNLV also created the Non-traditional Student Commission to work with returning adults and make the campus more adult-friendly. As part of this effort, the school designated an advisor for returning adults, created a webpage for adult students, and printed a guide

for non-traditional students. UNLV also sought to reduce the financial barriers facing ready adults by working with a private foundation to provide need-based scholarships for adult students. These scholarships range from $500 to $2,500 and send a message to students that they are welcome back at college.

The pilot project with the firefighters presented strong justification for NSHE and the board to revise the system-level policies for acceptance of credits from prior learning and experience. This change provided consistent and transparent processes for awarding and transferring credit earned through prior learning.

Northern region. The northern region working group consisted of the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC), and Western Nevada College (WNC). This group developed what initially was a joint regional-marketing campaign that grew to include other regions as well. NSHE used this marketing concept as part of a statewide campaign that launched in 2011. This marketing campaign includes a website (www.educatenevada.org) focused on returning adult students.

The UNR effort began by developing individualized advising plans for the 370 former students identified through the state's data-mining effort.[47] The advisors contacted these students, offered concrete help solving the problems that led them to drop out of school and helped identify scholarships for part-time students, who are often excluded from many scholarship opportunities.[48] UNR and the other institutions in the region collaborated to develop a series of "Don't Wait, Graduate!" materials to publicize the degree completion options.[49] Following this outreach campaign, the *Reno Gazette Journal* published an article about both the statewide NTNM program and UNR's efforts. This article generated significant interest in the region and resulted in more than 75 requests for information about the program.[50]

TMCC, using the list of 5,000 former students that NSHE had provided, honed in on 297 students who had more than 60 credits (the minimum needed for an associate's degree) but had not received a degree from the college. Of these students, 48 had completed the requirements for a degree but not applied for graduation; the institution has since helped these students graduate. Another 89 students were within three credits of completing their degree, and 154 were within four to six credits of finishing. The college mailed letters to all these students and followed up with information and assistance to help them finish.

Money was a challenge even for some students who had completed the degree requirements, with some unable (or unwilling) to pay the $15 graduation fee. To address this, the college eliminated the fee for all students. It has also created a more flexible tuition-payment plan, which helps adults who are accustomed to paying bills monthly or who may not be able to cover tuition in one payment.

TMCC also recognized that math requirements can be a formidable barrier for many ready adults. TMCC surveyed more than 500 students about their preferences on everything from technology to textbooks. Using the results, an instructor developed custom materials that incorporated some of the needed remediation for students and directly addressed the needs of adults.

TMCC also took advantage of board policies allowing for reverse transfer, or the awarding of associate's degrees to students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions with the intention of earning bachelor's degree. The institution actively seeks out former students that transferred to UNR and are now eligible for an associate's degree. TMCC covers the transcript costs for these students if they wish to transfer credits back to graduate with an associate's degree.

WNC contacted former students who had 45 credits and provided advising to help them choose a degree program. It reached out to 500 former students with materials about the benefits of finishing a degree. The school also implemented a flexible payment plan. Of those initially contacted, 45 returned and started work to complete their degrees.

To reach another population of potential ready adults, WNC recruited state employees, in part because of the close proximity of the state offices in Carson City. The college surveyed 15,000 state

workers and received 3,276 responses. They found that 77 percent of the workers without a four-year degree were at least somewhat interested in obtaining a bachelor's degree, and 47 percent expressed some interest in an associate's degree.[51] The survey showed that workers wanted credit for job-related experience, flexible class schedules, online classes, and financial assistance. Although the survey did not gather specific information about respondents' attainment levels, it did find that 53 percent did not have at least a four-year degree and 17 percent had attended postsecondary classes in the past year.

Unfortunately, due to staff shortages, WNC has not been able to follow up on the survey or continue to work specifically with state employees.

Elko region. Due to the state's geographical challenges, Great Basin College (GBC) in Elko formed its own working group. The school reached out to 300 former students. Of those, 12 already had met the requirements for a degree and graduated. The school is also using existing outreach initiatives for non-traditional students to target others in the ready adult population. One challenge is that mining is the leading industry in the region. Because miners work on rotating shifts, regular class schedules do not fit their schedules. GBC has had some success using online classes.

GBC is battling a perception held by some that good jobs are available without a postsecondary credential. Many of the former students it has contacted say they have jobs and do not need a degree. Because of the current economic reality in rural Nevada, the benefits of a college degree may not be apparent to residents in these areas.

What Worked

With strong commitment from the system office and institutional leaders who are committed to serving returning adults, Nevada made substantial progress on serving ready adults without committing significant additional financial resources.

Data mining. Nevada's data-mining team identified more than 21,000 former students that met the state's definition of ready adult. Significantly, of these, the data-mining effort found that more than 19,000 were former community college students. The state sent lists of students to each school, consisting only of that institution's former students. Nevada, like South Dakota, filtered its data through the National Student Clearinghouse to remove students who transferred to out-of-state institutions or graduated elsewhere.

Strong system leadership and cooperation with and among institutions. Nevada's initiative has benefited from strong leadership at the highest levels of the system office but has also seen great cooperation and collaboration among individual institutions. NSHE leadership brought a spirit of responsiveness and collaboration to the statewide meetings. The board, following recommendations from the working groups, adopted new policies on prior learning assessment, payment flexibility, and reporting requirements to make it easier for institutions to serve adult learners. This spirit of collaboration and willingness to make changes encouraged project participants to invest time and effort in the project.

In several cases institutions jointly launched programs aimed at ready adults and collaborated to develop course offerings. In addition, the reentry concierges were encouraged to recommend that interested adults attend other institutions if their needs might be better met elsewhere.

Barriers identified and addressed at institutional and state levels. Nevada succeeded in identifying and addressing barriers at both the state and institutional levels. Statewide meetings brought together policymakers and institutional leaders to discuss the barriers. These conversations were very constructive and helped the project team identify and address barriers for adult learners. Significantly, NSHE provided the political will to follow through on recommendations and make the called-for changes in state policy, which provided significant momentum to the overall effort.

Pilot program with targeted employer. In southern Nevada the pilot program for firefighters has created a network of administrators and advisors with experience in helping ready adults reenter college and complete their degrees. After working initially with a reenrollment counselor, students are connected to officials throughout the institution

who understand many of the challenges that face the ready adult population. These contacts can answer questions, minimize frustration for the student, and ease the pathway to success.

The state used the pilot effort to inform policy and practice, making significant changes based on outcomes from this small project.

Comprehensive awareness. Nevada engaged every public institution in the state in raising awareness about the importance of serving ready adults. As a result, champions of ready adults emerged on nearly every campus. This has created culture changes at many institutions in which ready adults are no longer an afterthought but a key part of the student population. The state is continuing quarterly meetings of the project participants and working groups, and representatives from the institutions have built relationships that continue to help them share promising practices for serving ready adults. NSHE and institutions statewide are discussing with state employers the creation of an outreach campaign to convince Nevada residents of the importance of higher education to their job prospects. Institutions have provided their advisors with training so that they can become more familiar with the unique challenges faced by ready adults and provide better support services to these non-traditional students. Familiarity with these issues may lead to tangible benefits in recruiting and retaining ready adults in the future. The NTNM effort in Nevada has also generated local and statewide media attention, which not only helped draw ready adults back to schools but also helped raise awareness about the importance of college throughout the state.

Ready adults as an integral part of state mission. Both at the system and institutional levels, there is a strong commitment to focusing on ready adults as part of any effort to boost state attainment rates. Nevada included a focus on this population in a recent grant application and has included it in its statewide Complete College America goals. This commitment to ready adults will continue to benefit the state and could prove an efficient means of raising state degree attainment levels, despite a severe state budget crisis.

Prior learning credit and assessment. With changes to the systemwide policy on prior learning assessment, returning adults will now have greater opportunities to receive credit for what they already know. While this eases their path towards degree completion, the changes made by NSHE uphold academic rigor throughout the system. The new policies clarify that tests widely used in other states are acceptable means of earning credit for prior learning and ensure that credit granted by one institution will be accepted by all other institutions. While the path to this policy change started with a small pilot project focused on firefighters, the implications will benefit all students in the system.

Ongoing Challenges

With one of the worst budget situations in the country and relatively low projected demand for higher education, Nevada faces serious systemic challenges in improving its higher education outcomes, including those for ready adults. Still, with strong leadership at the system level, Nevada has an opportunity to surmount these challenges and maintain the momentum generated through the NTNM effort.

State budget. Budget cuts to higher education necessitated by the recession are reducing the capacity of institutions and the state system to serve its students. Although policy changes enacted at the system level will have a lasting impact by eliminating barriers for ready adults, staffing reductions could threaten adoption of new practices at some institutions. The state budget will remain a challenge for the foreseeable future and maintaining a focus on reaching a new target population may be difficult.

Focus on veterans. As the Nevada Board of Regents continues its public outreach efforts to ready adults, it is seeing a sharp increase in the number of veterans participating in postsecondary education. Many of these students could fall under the state definition for ready adults. As in other states, these students face challenges and unique barriers that need to be addressed systematically. They may bring credits from multiple institutions and need assistance in combining disparate credits into a workable degree pathway. Changes to prior learning assessment policies should benefit this population.

The state can further facilitate improvements by bringing together institutionally-based veterans' service coordinators to share their experiences and identify ways the statewide system can work better for these students.

Value of higher education. Nevada may face challenges due to the relatively low economic return rate for bachelor's degrees, compared to other states. However, the economic return for an individual completing an associate's degree is quite high. NSHE can continue to stress the importance of education through its statewide outreach campaign and use available data to counteract the perception that postsecondary education is not valuable in the state. The campaign could also highlight success stories of adults who have returned to college and completed their degrees.

Summary

Nevada's project had strong buy-in from institutions, as well as deep commitment at the system level, which allowed the state to make considerable progress. Nevada's effort generated substantial cooperation between the system office and institutions, as well as strategic collaborations between the institutions themselves. Ideas and practices traveled relatively easily from one institution to another and between regions in the state. Rather than competing with one another for prospective students, most advising staff genuinely seemed interested in finding the best fit for potential students and were willing to refer them to other institutions. The state developed a strong network of institutional leaders and policymakers that continue to collaborate on efforts to improve outcomes for ready adults.

Furthermore, there were significant changes to system policies, and the institutions internalized many new practices and programs that are greatly improving services to ready adults and helping to boost state degree attainment.

Although the commitment to adult learners remains strong at the state and institutional levels, the state's budget difficulties have impacted some components in the project. As the state budget begins to recover, this commitment is poised to pay off with continued support for serving ready adults.

SOUTH DAKOTA

The South Dakota Board of Regents (SDBOR) laid out six goals for its NTNM work:

- Identify and reach out to ready adults.
- Create a reporting system that allows institutions to reach out to students who fail to return to school.
- Identify and remove policy barriers for ready adults.
- Address financial barriers faced by returning adults.
- Address state workforce needs.
- Create degree programs and address ready adult needs for reentry.

The South Dakota project team made significant progress in identifying state- and institution-level barriers and crafting data-driven solutions to improve the state's efforts to better serve ready adults.

Policy Context

South Dakota has a relatively strong, centralized governance structure overseeing the state's public four-year institutions. As the NTNM project progressed, policymakers from the board of regents listened to input from the institutions as well as the SDBOR staff and made several significant policy changes to better serve ready adults.

Governance. The SDBOR is the centralized governing body for the state's higher education system. The system consists of six public universities, two schools for students with disabilities, and three university centers.[52] These university centers are located in larger population areas not served by other institutions and offer courses from the four-year colleges; a student at one of them can earn credits from any of the state's institutions. Although the board of regents has significant, centralized policy-setting authority, the state uses a cooperative decision-making process, where policy and rule changes are generally proposed and reviewed by advisory councils made up of regental staff and representatives from institutions.[53] Notably, the postsecondary governance structure in South Dakota separates the state's technical institutes (which are roughly the equivalent of two-year institutions in other states) from other institutions.

Attainment. South Dakota ranks near the middle of states in education attainment measures (see Table 4). But the state faces a serious demographic challenge, as the number of traditional-aged students is expected to decline by 8 percent from 2008 to 2018.[54] There is concern that the state will not be able to meet future workforce demands without producing significant numbers of degrees from the adult population. As in other states, there is a large pool of residents who have earned some college credits but have not completed a degree.

State budget climate. While South Dakota's economic health has been more resilient than in many states, budget cuts from FY09 to FY12 have reduced funding for higher education by just over 5 percent.[55]

Table 4. South Dakota at a Glance

Category	State Results	National Average	State Rank**
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least an associate's degree*	41%	38%	17
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least a bachelor's degree*	29%	30%	24
Percentage of adults 25-64 with some college but no degree*	24%	22%	N/A
State attainment goal***	N/A		
Definition of ready adult	Former degree-seeking students with 90 or more credits toward a bachelor's degree		
Data-mining outcomes	South Dakota identified more than 4,000 former students who left the system from 2003-2008 and who met the definition of ready adult; filtering these names through the National Student Clearinghouse to eliminate those that enrolled elsewhere reduced this to 2,476 former students		

* U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.
** These rankings do not include Washington, D.C., or Puerto Rico.
***Paul Turman, "South Dakota Ready Adult Profiles," PowerPoint presentation, 16 September 2009, Denver, CO.

State Actions

South Dakota (along with New Jersey) joined the NTNM effort in 2009 in the second cohort of states. This expansion of the project was made possible through a supplemental grant from Lumina Foundation. As a result, South Dakota began its statewide NTNM effort one year after Arkansas, Colorado, and Nevada. But members of the project leadership team had participated in the joint meeting with other NTNM states just prior to launching the project. Staff from the system office understood the importance of analyzing the available state data on ready adults. After mining the state data system, board staff were able to provide a detailed analysis of the state's ready adults, including their academic histories and other characteristics. Data showed that South Dakota had an average of about 800 students leaving the system each year with more than 90 credits.[56] The state then filtered these names through the National Student Clearinghouse to eliminate those that transferred to other institutions, which reduced the numbers by about 40 percent but still left a significant number of ready adults.[57] The analysis found that these students were academically proficient and likely leaving college due to nonacademic issues and challenges.[58]

South Dakota used a private-sector data-matching firm to obtain current contact information for the list of former students, as Arkansas had. The state used the updated contact information provided by this process to conduct targeted outreach to draw them back.

Each of five working groups that were established during the first year of the project were consistent with existing committees and made a series of recommendations to address the barriers they identified for ready adults in the state. The board of regents has made significant progress in implementing these recommendations, with demonstrable progress in improving outcomes for ready adults.

In addition to identifying barriers in each of the key areas through meetings of the working groups, the board also required the institutions to participate in the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFI) process to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses in serving adult students (see box on p. 7). The institutions found that they were strongest in providing multiple methods of instruction, using technology to provide timely information, and reaching out to promote access regardless of a student's schedule and location. They were weakest in supporting transitions into and out of their academic programs and in addressing career planning. Surprisingly, distance education scored higher than face-to-face courses on every benchmark of adult friendliness at both regular campuses and university centers. This provided institutional leaders with data to support changes and implement new policies and practices to better serve all adult students, including ready adults.

General studies major. The state's data analysis showed that a significant number of ready adults were previously enrolled in professional degree programs, such as nursing or education. SDBOR staff believed that their withdrawal may have been due either to an inability to pass licensure examinations or to difficulties in completing final internships or student teaching for these degrees. Because they had taken so much specialized coursework, it was difficult for them to earn a degree in another program without taking significantly more coursework and extending their time to degree.

To remedy this, project leaders proposed the creation of a general studies major that could serve two needs. First, it would give these former students a pathway to a degree as they reenrolled. Second, for current students facing this predicament, it could serve as a "parachute degree" that would allow them to change majors if the final parts of the degree requirements could not be met. Four institutions, working with staff from the board of regents, formally proposed the new degree offering.[59] The program gives students with significant credits more flexibility to build their own degree program if they are unable to complete a more specific one. The board approved the degree program, and the four institutions began offering the general studies degree in the fall semester of 2010.[60] By the fall semester of 2012, there were about 150 students pursuing this major, although it is difficult to track whether these are all returning

adults or not.[61] This action may help prevent dropouts as well by providing another degree pathway for students.

The board also lowered the credit requirements for a degree at system schools from 128 to 120 in 2011. This action stemmed in part from project participants identifying the higher credit threshold as a barrier for adults to complete their degrees.[62]

Concierge model. Following Nevada's lead, each South Dakota institution has identified a single point of contact to help returning adults navigate the reenrollment process. Each point of contact is tasked with helping ready adults develop degree plans and with meeting regularly with board of regents staff to discuss the benefits of the program, share lessons learned, and provide feedback on remaining barriers and challenges facing ready adults. Although not officially labeled "concierges," as in Nevada, the concept is similar.

Prior learning assessment. Previously, the board of regents' policy did not allow students to test out or use prior learning assessment to fill certain degree requirements in the system. Based on recommendations from the project working groups and policy advisory councils, the board reversed this policy in October 2010 and is encouraging institutions to accept prior learning assessments and credit by examination. According to state reports, few students are using these assessments, perhaps due to the time and effort required to assemble a portfolio for evaluation.[63]

Revised degree completion metric and performance funding. NTNM has helped to reinforce the notion that completion is important in South Dakota's higher education system and that ready adults are a vital part of boosting completion rates. But traditional graduation rate metrics do not usually capture returning adults. The board revised the state degree completion metric to include returning adults as part of the calculation. This new metric is now part of regular data reporting by institutions, and the system anticipates that it will help underscore the importance of graduating ready adults and other transfer students who may not be captured by traditional graduation rate measures.

The state also recently launched a small performance funding program that rewards institutions based on the number of graduates. Board staff believe that this will incentivize institutions to reengage ready adults and help them complete degrees.[64]

Stop-out prevention. Following recommendations from project participants that were passed on through the Academic Affairs Council, the board shortened the system's registration period by one week starting in the 2010 spring semester. This change gave counseling staff time to reach out to all students who had failed to register, in an effort to prevent stop-outs. As a result of this pilot, the system saw an increase in the number of registrations. However, a smaller number of students registered during the shortened window, so it also increased the staff time needed to track students down. The board is also implementing an early warning system and a systemwide degree audit program to try to improve stopout prevention across the system.

Financial holds. The working groups identified financial holds—the practice of prohibiting a potential student from reenrolling if he or she owes the institution money from fines, fees, or defaulted loans—as a barrier for ready adults. The board, again acting on recommendations from project participants, allowed institutions to create alternative payment plans for financial holds for ready adults. Prior to this, institutions had little leeway to provide flexibility to returning adults with financial holds.

More recently, the board has revised the system's financial governance by allowing institutions to directly manage their own tuition funds and give them control over collections of past-due accounts. Some institutions have begun using this authority to waive owed fees or develop repayment plans that make it easier for potential students who may not be able to afford to make a large lump sum payment to reenroll.

Online-learning student services. Project working groups also identified barriers for ready adults in online learning. Although distance learning may be a highly effective mode of delivery for ready adults,

some may lack the technological skills to take full advantage. To remedy this Dakota State University piloted a class that prepares students with the technology skills they will need for online classes. This pilot effort has now been expanded and is available to students systemwide.

Hybrid course expansion and coding. Hybrid courses, which blend face-to-face instruction with distance learning, are a promising delivery mode for adult students. While they are used successfully across the system, they were difficult to fully evaluate and track because they did not have their own coding structure within the state's student information system. The board has expanded the offerings and will code them so that institutional and board staff can better evaluate the success of this method. New coding for these courses has been approved and is being implemented.

Transfer of credit matrix. Ready adults in most states often struggle with difficulties in transferring credits from previous institutions when they reenroll to complete a degree. Often, they lose significant credits when transferring, as the institutional and systemwide policies for acceptance of transfer credit are frequently opaque or nonexistent. To address this barrier the institutions developed a comprehensive matrix that shows how credit transfers into and through the system. The matrix has now been implemented at four institutions. The board has also included the matrix in the new South Dakota web portal (see below) so that returning adults (and other transfer students) can get a better idea of how their credits might transfer before contacting institutions.

Comprehensive communications plan. An effective and coherent communications campaign is key to successfully bringing ready adults back to college. The system effectively used data mining and a private sector partnership to gather up-to-date contact information on students who left regental institutions with 90 or more credits. The system was then able to send these former students targeted invitations to return and complete their degrees.

Concurrently, South Dakota developed a broader communications plan as part of a new statewide college access portal that includes a section dedicated to adults returning to college (www.selectdakota.org). The adult learner portion of the website was developed based on the work of the project and includes a tool to solicit feedback from potential returning students, as well as the transfer matrix described above.

Academic amnesty. A waiver is available to provide "academic amnesty" for students who performed poorly in a particular semester. Under this policy, students are able to essentially erase an entire semester of poor performance. Although the South Dakota data analysis showed that ready adults generally performed better than the average student, it also showed that many appear to have simply walked away during the last semester they attended classes, rather than undergo the formal process of withdrawing, leaving them with failing grades. With near-zero grade point averages in their final semester, these returning students would normally be placed on academic probation but can now reenroll and complete their degrees without facing this barrier. The board and the institutional points of contact are encouraging the use of this waiver authority.

Institutional residency requirements. Like many other states, the South Dakota system requires students to accumulate 32 credits at the institution from which they graduate. However, flexibility built into the policy allows institutions to waive the requirement in appropriate circumstances. The board, along with the on-campus ready adult points of contact, is encouraging institutions to take advantage of this flexibility and waive institutional credit requirements where appropriate. The board is continuing to work with the campus points of contact to develop a unified solution.

What Worked

While the process in South Dakota may not be replicable everywhere, many of its promising practices could be duplicated in part and result in improvements for ready adults without the dedication of new funds or resources.

Strong statewide policy focus. South Dakota's unified governance structure meant that commitment from the board of regents led to specific policy changes that benefited ready adults

returning to the four-year sector. In addition, the working groups focused on recommending changes that would make current policies—such as those around prior learning assessment—more centralized and coherent. The effort was able to successfully address policy and practice changes at the state and institutional levels, which should greatly benefit ready adults in the state.

Effective use of data to support policy changes. As noted, the board's project leadership presented project participants with a detailed data analysis of ready adults at the outset of the state's efforts. The extensive data mining and thoughtful analysis drove the working groups' discussions and helped them craft well-grounded solutions and policy changes. The data detailed the size of the population and helped dispel myths that these students could not perform high-quality academic work.

Commitment from institutional champions. Creating a single point of contact for ready adults on every campus has helped bring the commitment for serving these students into the institutions. The effort also benefited from high-level support at the institutions. Institutional engagement and commitment made possible the creation of a general studies degree and provided more flexibility in granting fee and hold waivers for ready adults.

Systematic examination of policy effects on ready adults. The working groups in South Dakota focused on their areas of responsibility and produced systematic and relevant recommendations to improve the system for ready adults. Many of these recommendations could be addressed through board rule changes and flexibility. This was supplemented by the ALFI analysis that informed some key decisions made by the board. Their work amounted to a policy audit and created a coherent statewide agenda with concrete steps to help ready adults.

Private-sector data matching. The South Dakota project team, like the one in Arkansas, sought to develop an interagency cooperative agreement to link current contact information with its list of ready adults. When attempts to partner with the state Department of Motor Vehicles fell through due to bureaucratic and privacy concerns, South Dakota partnered with Acxiom to provide up-to-date contact information (see box below). The solution proved efficient and highly cost-effective, with an 83 percent match rate and a cost of just over $600 for more than 2,000 students.[65]

Tracking Down Ready Adults through Private Sector Data Matching

Most NTNM states were able to generate lists of thousands of students who left state systems with a significant amount of college credits. As the states developed outreach programs to target these students, they discovered that they had an abundance of out-of-date contact information. Project teams sought to solve this problem by developing data-sharing agreements with other state agencies, such as state departments of motor vehicles, or by having interns hunt individually for current information through directories and internet resources, with varying degrees of success.

Arkansas pursued a partnership with a private data firm called Acxiom, which aggregates massive amounts of data on all residents of the United States. The data collected are all publicly available and used in a variety of applications. But with a name and old address, Acxiom was able to provide current contact information on the vast majority of former students. While this may raise privacy concerns for some, the fact that the information is already available in the public domain and being used by the private sector led other states to follow suit.

This solution has proved highly economical and effective for states. South Dakota, for example, was able to generate current contact information for 83 percent of the former students on its list (about 2,000 total) at a cost of just over $600—far less than the staff time necessary to track these names down individually. South Dakota used this information to contact these students with invitations to return to college. States have undertaken this data mining and matching while complying fully with federal privacy regulations.

While NTNM states pursuing this strategy worked with Acxiom, there are other firms that provide similar services. States or institutions interested in pursuing this path can find an appropriate partner that efficiently and quickly gives them current contact information that can be used to reengage former students.

Stop-out prevention. While South Dakota is committed to improving policies and practices that are barriers for ready adults completing their degrees, the project also led the state to focus on ways to prevent students from leaving in the first place. The system's "parachute degree" concept, as well as efforts to contact students who fail to register for classes, will likely improve retention. The system is also developing an early alert system, as well as a systemwide degree audit process to further address the issue.

Ongoing Challenges

South Dakota faces several challenges in continuing its work to remove barriers for ready adults.

Differentiated tuition. South Dakota charges higher tuition rates for students who are "off campus" and taking courses either online or through the University Centers. In practice, adults (including those who already have significant credits) are more likely to attend the University Centers or take online classes than traditional students. This means they are paying more than students who enroll in more traditional "bricks and mortar" classes. The state law that established the University Centers ensured that they would be "self-supporting," and thus they must charge higher tuition rates.

Increasing student use of prior learning assessments. Although the board enacted policy changes to encourage the use of prior learning assessments systemwide, student participation has remained low. With much national attention now focusing on different options for carrying out large-scale prior learning assessments, South Dakota can begin to look for systems that increase their usage and seek to borrow promising strategies.

Need-based scholarships. South Dakota has one of the smallest need-based state aid programs in the country, with money coming mostly from private donors. Legislative efforts to provide general funds for a need-based program failed during the 2010 legislative session. If created, such a program should include sizable grants to encourage eligible ready adults to return to school. The board continues to pursue legislation that would create such a program.

Engagement of the technical institutes. The postsecondary governance structure that only includes the four-year institutions made it difficult for the board of regents to engage the two-year technical institutes and broaden the project's focus to include ready adults who may want to pursue a two-year degree.

Summary

South Dakota's centralized governance structure and the project leadership's focus on developing specific policy recommendations led to the identification and removal of many barriers hindering the success of adult learners. South Dakota's detailed data analysis gave the project a foundation on which to build numerous activities. The analysis also informed policy work and helped to fuel the commitment to evaluating policy changes, which will allow the state to continue to refine policies and practices in the future. This analysis was important for building support for the effort within the state, but the information and conclusions have also helped inform efforts in other states. Although state data systems obviously differ a great deal, South Dakota's work in this area is a model for others.

The existing committee structures within the state that allow for dialogue between board of regents staff and institutional leaders proved important to the project's success and sustainability. The examination of issues and challenges identified by project participants was aided by this more formal state structure, in which specific solutions, in the form of changes to board policy, could be developed, approved, and implemented.

Although not generally a focus of the NTNM effort, South Dakota also instituted policies and practices aimed at preventing students from stopping out. The strong commitment from the board of regents and the systemwide policy changes are helping these efforts to continue and are expected to lead to improvement in the state's attainment rates.

NEW JERSEY

The New Jersey Commission on Higher Education (NJCHE) had 10 goals for its NTNM work:

- Reach out to adult learners.
- Identify barriers for adult learners.
- Implement best practices for adult learners.
- Continue to improve transfer.
- Recognize prior learning statewide.
- Increase statewide marketing to adult learners.
- Improve data systems.
- Work with institutions to help adult learners.
- Expand data to include ready adult students who earned their credit out of state.
- Increase data security.

The NTNM effort in New Jersey faced significant challenges, including a change in leadership at the NJCHE, a severe state budget crisis, and the potential elimination of the commission. Due to this environment, the project team faced difficulties in securing the engagement of state institutions beyond the associated subgrant process and was forced to halt the NTNM project after one year. In 2011 Governor Chris Christie issued a reorganization plan that abolished the NJCHE and restructured higher education governance.

Policy Context

Although the state fares relatively well in overall education attainment, it will have to continue to focus on including adult learners in order to meet future workforce needs. This relatively high performance has come under a decentralized governance structure with autonomous institutions.

Governance. Higher education governance in New Jersey has undergone significant changes in the past 20 years. In 1994 New Jersey abolished the New Jersey State Board and Department of Higher Education, making statewide governance of higher education virtually nonexistent.[66] This change shifted power to institutional boards and created two organizations: the Presidents' Council and the NJCHE.[67] The commission mainly provided coordination, policy development, and advocacy for the state's 31 public and 33 independent institutions.[68]

The next change occurred in June 2011, when the NJCHE was abolished and all powers, functions, and duties were transferred to the Secretary of Higher Education.[69] What remained constant was the decentralized nature of the system. Institutions in New Jersey each have their own governing boards. The boards are responsible for institutional planning; the institution's mission and goals; management of the institution, including requests for state support; and institutional operations, including tuition and fees and standards for admission and graduation.[70]

Attainment. New Jersey ranks near the top of all states in degree attainment and has a highly educated workforce (see Table 5). To further improve these numbers and meet future workforce demand, state higher education leaders committed to addressing the traditional pipeline of students and increasing degree production among the adult population. This effort was designed to help New Jersey remain competitive and help drive economic development in the state far into the future. Reenrolling adults with significant college credit

Table 5. New Jersey at a Glance

Category	State Results	National Average	State Rank**
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least an associate's degree*	45%	38%	7
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least a bachelor's degree*	38%	30%	3
Percentage of adults 25-64 with some college but no degree*	18%	22%	N/A
State attainment goal	N/A		
Definition of ready adult	• 20 years of age or older • Left a New Jersey institution since 2000 • In good academic standing • Has earned significant credits (institutions allowed to further narrow definition)		
Data-mining outcomes	Institution-by-institution efforts		

* U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.
** These rankings do not include Washington, D.C., or Puerto Rico.

offers one of the most efficient options for the state to meet this demand.

State budget climate. Although New Jersey continues to face one of the most challenging state budget situations in the country, between FY09 and FY12 the state maintained funding for higher education and increased state support by slightly less than 1 percent.[71]

State Actions

Recognizing the difficulties of making policy dictates in a decentralized environment, New Jersey, like Colorado, leveraged other funding to provide institutional grants to reengage ready adults. New Jersey used the College Access Challenge Grant, a federally-funded formula grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education, to focus on adults with prior college credit. The subgrant program, called Disengaged Adults Returning to College (DARC), awarded funding to institutions in 2009 and 2010 and expects to award a third round of grants in mid-2012.

For the purposes of the subgrants, the commission defined ready adults as individuals 20 years of age or older who left a New Jersey institution since 2000 in good standing without earning an undergraduate degree (Table 5).[72] The state, however, has allowed institutions to narrow this definition as they see fit. Eight institutions received grants in 2009 and 2010. An evaluation of the first eight grants found that recruiting students to reenroll was more difficult than expected. Targeted outreach to former students, along with improved student services, such as offering broader prior learning assessment services, were identified as being important to future success of the effort.[73]

Although the eight institutions that received grants proceeded in different ways, their efforts shared several common components.

Data mining and outreach. The eight institutions identified approximately 21,300 former students that met their definition of a ready adult and attempted to directly contact over 17,000.[74] Of these, the institutions enrolled over 300 students by the spring semester of 2011.[75] Like other states in the NTNM project, schools attempting to contact students experienced difficulties with out-of-date contact information. Some used internet applications that comb public records to provide contact information.[76] Some institutions also made attempts to contact the former students by phone and email.[77]

Institutions also conducted more generalized outreach campaigns focused on adult students, but an evaluation of these efforts suggests that to date targeted outreach has been more effective.[78]

Incentives to return. The institutions involved with DARC offered different incentives and programs to adults with prior college credit as inducements to return. These incentives included fee waivers, book stipends, childcare vouchers, priority registration, and workshops focused on nonacademic skills.[79] The evaluation of the programs found that returning students valued the book stipends more than any of the other offerings, although only 27 percent of the students said that the incentives were a major factor in their decision.[80]

DARC coordinators and advisors. The institutions hired program coordinators that in many cases also served as student advisors. These coordinators functioned similarly to the concierges and single points of contact established in other states. An overwhelming majority of students in the degree completion programs cited the advising provided by these coordinators as a crucial component in their likelihood of completing a degree.[81]

Program coordinators found that they had to be flexible in advising these students and that it was difficult for students to meet during regularly scheduled times.[82] This echoes a lesson learned in other states. Having flexible and diverse class schedules is not enough to meet the needs of adult learners; they also need flexibility in accessing student services and institutional business offices, which are often open only during regular business hours.

Student surveys. The evaluation team examining the DARC effort conducted surveys with returning students. Their data echo findings from South Dakota: students who earn significant college credit usually leave school for nonacademic reasons. Only 8 percent of the students who returned cited

academic difficulties as their reason for originally leaving.[83]

What Worked

Unfortunately, New Jersey's budget situation and leadership changes led WICHE and the state to agree to end the NTNM effort after one year. While New Jersey's involvement in the NTNM project was limited, the following promising practices were gleaned from its effort.

Flexible scheduling for student support services. While most institutions recognize the need for flexible course scheduling, many core business and support services are still only offered during traditional hours. Providing these services outside of normal hours or through electronic delivery can assist all students and will have a particularly beneficial impact on ready adults.

Additional resources. As mentioned above, New Jersey's use of the federal College Access Challenge Grant funds allowed the state to continue its work with ready adults despite not being able to continue with the NTNM project. Because of these funds, New Jersey continues to focus on and learn about ready adults.

Strong evaluation component. Although the effort in New Jersey was highly decentralized through the use of subgrants, the project committed to carrying out rigorous and constructive evaluations of the broader effort. This has allowed the state to collect and disseminate promising practices to all institutions, which has been challenging in other states that have followed the subgrant approach.

Ongoing Challenges

The uncertainty surrounding NJCHE significantly impacted New Jersey's efforts and made it difficult to continue the project in the state. The reorganization of the state governance structure provides additional uncertainty about how state leaders will proceed with efforts to reengage ready adults. The early termination of the project made it difficult to identify fully the specific challenges faced by returning adults in New Jersey. As the state has continued its subgrant program through the governance reorganization, early indications are that institutions may continue to identify challenges and develop solutions in the coming years.

Prior learning assessments. Prior learning assessment services are uneven across New Jersey. While institutions such as Thomas Edison State College are recognized as national leaders in offering fair but academically rigorous evaluation of prior learning, policies at other institutions are inconsistent. Students responding to the evaluators' survey suggested that in general, they wished they were able to receive credit for life experience, particularly to bypass life skills classes aimed at traditional college students.[84] There was also little consistency statewide among policies for acceptance of prior learning credit, which made it difficult for students to understand the different options available to them.[85]

Funding, leadership, and governance. New Jersey simultaneously experienced a desperate fiscal situation, a significant change in leadership, and significant change in statewide governance of higher education. These factors made it difficult to sustain a statewide focus on ready adults; however, the continued commitment to the DARC program suggests that state leaders remain committed to serving this population.

Summary

With the most decentralized higher education governance of any state in the project, New Jersey worked to leverage the federal College Access Challenge Grant, which proved to be its best option for effecting change. The institutions that received grants made moderate progress in serving ready adults and appear to have institutionalized some changes to better serve this population.

With the potential dissolution of the NJCHE looming over the staff throughout the year that New Jersey was involved with NTNM, it was difficult to secure cooperation and buy-in from institutions, other than by using subgrants. It was not clear during the project whether institutions felt that there were significant state-level barriers to serving ready adults. With the highly decentralized governance structure, institutions have the freedom to adjust their policies and practices as needed and have made changes to institutional policies and practices.

While institutions involved in the DARC program have made substantial progress in serving ready adults, other institutions in the state could likely benefit from implementing similar activities and analyzing their own policies and practices.

It is worth noting that New Jersey's Thomas Edison State College works effectively as an adult-serving institution and has already adopted many of the most promising practices discussed throughout this report.

Assessing New Jersey's progress towards its stated project goals is more difficult. The broader systemwide goals were generally not accomplished due to the uncertainty about and subsequent elimination of the commission. But through the subgrant program, the state has made some progress toward better serving adult learners at the institutional level.

NORTH DAKOTA

The North Dakota University System (NDUS) established six goals for its NTNM work:

- Identify and target ready adults through relevant databases.
- Improve the capabilities of the state's longitudinal database to provide needed data.
- Identify institutional barriers and policies that hinder ready adults in completing their academic programs.
- Develop and implement best state- and institutional-level practices and policies that facilitate the return of ready adults.
- Develop a coordinated marketing strategy for promoting reentry for the ready adult student.
- Implement the action plan led by the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education and coordinated through the Adult Learners Council with the institutions of the NDUS.

Although North Dakota joined the NTNM project well after the other states, project leaders built support among the institutions and continue to improve policy and practice to better serve ready adults.

Policy Context

North Dakota was not part of the original two cohorts of NTNM states but in 2010, when New Jersey was unable to complete the second year of its commitment, there was an opportunity to begin efforts in the state. North Dakota was well-positioned for this project, and with permission from Lumina Foundation, WICHE arranged for an expedited schedule to conduct the NTNM work in the state.

The policy context was ripe for action with respect to adult learners. First, North Dakota is experiencing a declining population of potential postsecondary students. WICHE projects that by 2014-15, the number of high school graduates in North Dakota will have decreased by more than 20 percent from 2004-05 levels (resulting in about 1,600 fewer graduates per year).[86] At the same time, between 2008 and 2018, new jobs that require postsecondary training and education in North Dakota are projected to increase by 14,000, and those jobs that require a high school diploma will grow by only 6,000.[87] To meet these demands, the state must become more efficient at producing degrees, including improving outcomes for adult and non-traditional students.

Second, the chancellor of the North Dakota University System had recently created the Adult Learners Council, a group of diverse individuals representing education, business, veterans groups, government, military, tribal colleges, vocational rehabilitation, workforce training, and the private sector.[88] The Adult Learners Council:

> Is committed to developing, implementing and sharing adult education best practices to make post-secondary education accessible and affordable to all North Dakotans. The council works to increase public and policymaker awareness of relationship between education and economic viability and to improve collaboration among public, private and tribal colleges.[89]

Specifically, the goals of the Adult Learners Council are to:

- Improve education accessibility and affordability for non-traditional age student populations.
- Improve public and policymaker awareness of the relationship between education and economic viability.
- Improve collaboration among public and private institutions in the state, including tribal colleges.
- Provide every North Dakotan with access to the postsecondary education and training needed to enable them to be personally and professionally successful.[90]

Creating this council was North Dakota's first step toward an active policy plan aimed at engaging and serving adults in the state. While the focus on ready adults is just one aspect of what the Adult Learners Council intends to accomplish, WICHE staff believed that involvement in the NTNM project could propel the council and help accomplish the state's overall goals because many of the lessons learned through this work can prove useful to all adults.

North Dakota is one of four states in the nation that has a biennial legislative session and only meets in odd-numbered years. The legislative calendar affects much of the NDUS's planning for new initiatives and was one of the drivers behind creating the Adult Learners Council. The calendar helped to guide much of the thinking and early planning of its work related to the NTNM project. NDUS was already moving swiftly ahead, and the timing of the condensed NTNM schedule complemented the systemwide efforts.

Governance. North Dakota has a strong, consolidated higher education governance structure. The North Dakota State Board of Higher Education is the governing and policy-setting board for the NDUS, which consists of two research universities, four regional universities, and five community colleges.[91] All institutions are accountable to the chancellor, who is the chief executive of the NDUS staff. The state board, which is supported by NDUS staff, has as its mission to "enhance the quality of life for all those served by the NDUS as well as the economic and social vitality of North Dakota."[92]

Table 6. North Dakota at a Glance

Category	State Results	National Average	State Rank**
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least an associate's degree*	45%	38%	7
Percentage of adults 25-64 with at least a bachelor's degree*	31%	30%	16
Percentage of adults 25-64 with some college but no degree*	25%	22%	N/A
State attainment goal***	Rank first in the nation in degree attainment		
Definition of ready adult****	Left postsecondary education with 70% of the credits necessary for a two- or four-year degree		
Data-mining outcomes****	Over 4,000 former students meeting the definition of ready adult left the system since 2004		

* U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.
** These rankings do not include Washington, D.C., or Puerto Rico.
*** North Dakota University System, "Strategic Plan and Objectives, 2009-2013."
**** North Dakota University System, "NTNM Action Steps (draft), October 2011."

Attainment. While North Dakota ranks in the upper half of states in terms of bachelor's degree attainment and towards the top in associate's degree attainment (see Table 6), the state is facing a long-term demographic shift that will shrink the traditional student pipeline. Over the next 10 years, the number of residents between the ages of 15 and 24 is projected to drop 16 percent, which could challenge the viability of higher education in the state.[93] As this pool of potential degree recipients shrinks, the state will have to turn to adult learners to maintain current levels of degree production.

State budget climate. Due to recent expansion of the state's oil and natural gas industry, the North Dakota economy did not suffer the same fate as other states during the recession. North Dakota's support for higher education increased by 35 percent from FY09 to FY12, leaving the state much better off than most others.[94]

State Actions

NDUS began its work by participating in the 2010 NTNM state leader meeting. Much like staff from the South Dakota Board of Regents, NDUS staff was able to learn some early lessons from the more experienced project states and apply them early in their process. As with the other states, its first major step was to identify participants and leaders for the five working groups. In October 2010, NDUS hosted its first WICHE-facilitated meeting, which was attended by about 60 people plus a key state legislator, NDUS and WICHE staff, and a team of consultants.

As intended, this meeting provided a forum through which NDUS staff and institutional representatives came together to identify policy and practice barriers to ready adults who are interested in returning to postsecondary education. Some of the challenges and concerns identified during the first meeting are outlined in Table 7.

Interestingly, this first meeting of the working groups focused on the institutions. Many of the institutional representatives seemed skeptical of what could actually be changed on their campuses. Furthermore, there was a sense of hesitation or perhaps even suspicion on the part of the working group participants about NDUS's intentions. As

Table 7. Challenges Identified During North Dakota's WICHE-facilitated Meeting

Data	• Data gathering • Multiple points of data collection • Analysis of data on adult learners, identity of adult learners
Academic affairs	• Multiple levels of prior learning assessment • Need for system policy about prior learning assessment • Technology can be a challenge for adult students • Course scheduling • Disconnect in degree requirements
Student services	• Limited hours for support services • Need for flexible payments • Institutional silos
Financing/ financial aid	• Availability of financial aid • Financial holds
Communications/ marketing	• Uncertainty about the preferences and needs of the target group • Concern about damaging relationships with alumni associations and foundations • Competition for enrollment growth hinders cooperation in marketing

Source: Robert Larson (director, North Dakota University System Online) to Demarée Michelau (director of policy analysis, WICHE), email, 16 November 2010.

explained in the forthcoming narrative, this dynamic shifted dramatically during the course of the NTNM project, which put the state in a position to make a significant difference in terms of adult college completion.

With the gaps identified, NDUS chose to hold its first intrastate meeting in April 2011, after the legislative session ended. This timeline worked well for the state and allowed key leaders to focus on the NTNM project but still not lose the critical momentum that began in October. Over the course of the year, the conversations developed and continued so that the key players could fine-tune the barriers that had been identified and start thinking critically about how to address those barriers.

Like the other NTNM states, NDUS began by examining its data. With the help of the data working group, NDUS staff settled on a definition of a ready adult student: individuals who have at least 70 percent of a completed degree but who had paused in their studies (Table 6). This initial process yielded about 8,000 names.[95] The initial plan was to refine this list by comparing it with data from the National Student Clearinghouse to determine how many of these individuals had already graduated.

The second WICHE-facilitated meeting took place in September 2011. This meeting had a different tone and capitalized on some opportunities for having outside experts and project participants from other states (both NTNM states and non-NTNM states). Participants heard from state and institutional representatives who work with ready adults, either at the state policy level or on campuses. They heard examples of what they can do to help their adult learners be successful. Further, NDUS staff shared with the participants a more concrete plan to identify ready adults in the state. While information on the former students gleaned from the data mining process was not shared at the meeting, NDUS has since sent each institution password-protected discs that contain data about each institution's ready adults. Institutions have been asked to review their data to ensure completeness and accuracy and return the information to NDUS so the data could then be compared with those of the National Student Clearinghouse.[96] Doing so will allow the state to filter out those former students that left an NDUS institution and transferred somewhere else. The next step is to secure updated addresses and contact individuals through an online survey that will provide respondents with an opportunity to select which institution(s) will receive their results. Each institution will then be responsible for contacting those students.[97]

In the course of the project, there was a distinct shift. Instead of the institutional representatives wondering if change could really happen, they wanted to know how they could continue this effort, what they could expect of the NDUS in terms of real policy change, and what the action steps over the next several months would be.

After the September meeting, NDUS staff met with the working group leaders and created an overview of a possible pilot project for the campuses. NDUS and the institutions identified five initiatives of focus for continued work:

- Prior learning assessment.
- Accelerated learning.

- Financial aid amnesty program.
- New opportunities for financial aid and scholarships.
- Training of staff to meet the needs of the returning adult learner.[98]

NDUS staff intends to hold a systemwide workshop in fall 2012 with a focus on developing four initiatives:

- Implementation of systemwide prior learning assessment and accelerated learning programs in participating NDUS institutions.
- Creation of a systemwide financial aid amnesty program that provides flexibility for students with financial holds.
- Creation of new financial aid/scholarship offerings.
- Implementation of cultural changes at the institutional level in serving the adult learner (returning or new).[99]

Following this workshop, NDUS institutions will be invited to:

- Participate in a pilot program (2013-15) that will include establishing and implementing institutional protocols for prior learning assessment and accelerated programs.
- Implement ways in which to provide financial assistance for the adult learner.
- Upgrade institutional protocols in serving the adult learner.[100]

NDUS's anticipated outcomes of this long-term action plan include:

- Implementation of prior learning assessment to expedite degree completion.
- Movement of at least one degree program to an accelerated status.
- New financial aid and scholarship opportunities for adult learners.
- Student service and other related services configured to more effectively serve the returning adult learner.[101]

What Worked

The North Dakota effort launched quickly, but with a favorable policy and governance context, the state was able to make significant progress. The project benefitted from support from the chancellor's office. Over the course of the project, institutions also came to strongly support the effort. The following are a few of North Dakota's promising practices and strategies.

Strong institutional support. Some project participants from the state's institutions were initially skeptical about the state effort and whether there would be change made by the system office. Over the course of the project, system staff sought input and advice from institutional leaders and built support for the effort. By the final project meeting, the institutions were fully supportive and focused on developing action steps to implement ideas developed over the course of the effort.

Commitment to significant change. Both the system and institutions appear to be committed to enacting significant change to better serve ready adults. The system is committed to implementing a broad program for prior learning assessment, new financial aid programs for adults, and accelerated degree programs. Institutions have committed to examining and improving the way they serve adult learners in a systemic fashion. While the expedited nature of North Dakota's NTNM project has not allowed time for these changes to take place, the state expects to see significant improvement for ready adults in the coming years.

Single point of contact. North Dakota institutions, following the lead of other states in the NTNM project, are planning to establish single points of contact for returning adults. These contacts, functioning similarly to Nevada's "concierges," should help institutions better serve ready adults.

Ongoing Challenges

Due to the state's relatively robust budget, North Dakota does not face the same fiscal constraints of other states. However, the commitment by NDUS and the state's institutions to sustain the work started under the NTNM project still faces some challenges.

Engagement of tribal colleges. North Dakota has a significant Native American population with five tribal colleges each under separate governance structure. The project did not succeed in engaging these institutions, which remains a significant gap in statewide efforts to serve all ready adults.

Data systems. North Dakota has switched data systems in recent years. Although the new data system will provide information for former students who left a state college recently, the extent to which historical data from before the conversion will be available is not clear.

Ongoing demographic challenges. North Dakota's working-age population is projected to shrink in coming years, which will cause significant issues for the state if it wants to create a well-educated workforce. The population decline lends more urgency to developing strong programs to serve ready adults now.

Changing state economy. The explosive growth of the petroleum industry in North Dakota has reshaped the state's economy. While entry-level workers may not currently need significant postsecondary education, the economic landscape cannot continue forever. Many expect that the demands for relevant postsecondary skills and training will increase in the relatively near future. The postsecondary system must continue to adapt to meet the state's workforce needs.

Summary

North Dakota's project faced challenges in launching a project with a condensed timeline. The effort had strong support from the state system and key state legislators, which undoubtedly added to the overall success and sustainability of the project.

NDUS has constituted the Adult Learners Council, which will be an important forum for sustaining attention on and momentum for serving ready adults. While the North Dakota project has not had time to generate the results and policy changes that other states have, the effort is well on its way. With institutional leaders coming to strongly support the effort over the course of the project, it is likely that the state will be able to make significant progress in coming years.

Conclusions

Non-Traditional No More sought to help states and institutions focus on adults that had significant college credit but no college credential. The project coined the term "ready adults" to capture this population, although others use terms like "stop outs" or "near completers." Whatever term is used, one thing is clear: serving this population is key to reaching the varied local, state, and national education attainment goals set by elected officials, policymakers, and education leaders. Eliminating the barriers that prevent them from returning to complete degrees can be an efficient way to increase education attainment levels in a state.

Drawing universal lessons that are applicable across all states and institutions is difficult. The diversity of state governance structures and institutional policies and practices mean that approaches that work in one place may not be as effective elsewhere. Still, the successful strategies developed and adopted over the course of this project suggest that there are approaches that can be tailored to fit diverse states.

While it is not possible to point to a specific number of adults who returned to complete their degrees as a result of this project, the initial results in the project states suggest that the climate for returning adults has improved significantly. Few states currently have the capacity in their data systems to accurately track outcomes for returning adults. With a focus on improving policy and practices that impact returning adults, the true benefits of the work will be seen more in the coming years. WICHE remains committed to following progress of these states and will monitor outcomes and degree completions in the coming years.

Still, there are some guiding principles for any strategy aimed at reengaging adults with prior college credits. In this concluding section, we summarize first the generalizable lessons that can apply to states and institutions across diverse contexts. Following these general recommendations, we present a series of specific promising practices (not "best practices," since we simply do not know yet) employed by states and institutions in their efforts to better serve this population. These practices were developed and implemented by states in the project in response to specific barriers.

General Recommendations and Promising Strategies

The strategies and tools implemented by states and institutions can address a wide range of barriers, but many were effective because they were implemented within a particular state context. The following section outlines the general recommendations for successfully implementing an effort to boost degree completion by ready adults. These general recommendations are followed by specific promising strategies that were identified and tested by the NTNM states and institutions.

General recommendations. While not every idea is applicable in every state, the process by which states developed solutions has led to eight general recommendations for those working to reach and reengage adults with significant prior college credit.

1. **Data mining is a critical first step in reengaging ready adults.**

States and institutions can mine their student record databases to identify large numbers of former students who left after earning significant college credits. These individuals can be targeted with direct communications that highlight available services and programs that could ease their path to earning a degree, as well as provide personalized information about completion options.

States streamlined their direct outreach by first filtering lists of former students through the National Student Clearinghouse to eliminate those who already graduated from other institutions.

Many states and institutions found that contact information for students in their databases was outdated, however. Partnering with private-sector data aggregation firms proved to be a cost-effective solution and provided current contact information for former students.

2. Strong buy-in by both state and institutional leaders is necessary to address barriers.

Successful projects all had strong champions at both the state and institutional levels. Having individuals in key leadership positions who understand the imperative for serving this population is a necessary step for building sustainable and effective efforts to serve returning adults.

3. Conversations between institutions and state policymakers are key.

Both state and institutional policies and practices have a large impact on returning adults, even in states with highly decentralized governance structures. As in many other issues facing higher education, key state leaders and policymakers must work cooperatively and share their perspectives on ways to improve the environment for returning adults. States that have established formal mechanisms for ongoing communication have been able to sustain their efforts and provide feedback as new programs and policies are implemented.

4. Assessing how well institutions and states currently serve adult learners is important to demonstrate success.

States and institutions must develop a clear and accurate picture of how well their current policies and practices serve adults with prior college credit. By conducting policy audits and gathering data and information from the student perspective, policymakers and institutional leaders can better understand current strengths as well as gaps where student needs are not being met.

5. A single point of contact for returning adults can ease the reentry process without significant new resources.

The reentry process can be difficult for ready adults. In many states, institutions have implemented a single point of contact for adults to help guide them through the application and readmission process. Called reentry "concierges" in Nevada, they can not only help place returning adults on the most efficient path toward degree completion, but they can also provide important feedback at the institution about potential policy and practice barriers that could be eliminated.

6. Broad outreach campaigns are necessary to reach all potential students.

As noted earlier in this section, data mining can be a very effective first step in identifying large numbers of ready adults in a state. Policymakers and institutional leaders must recognize, however, that there are almost certainly large numbers of ready adults in a state or near an institution who are not in any of the relevant databases. These individuals may have attended private institutions or started their academic careers at an out-of-state institution before stopping out. Migration may also be a large factor as adults who earned significant credit in another state may move for reasons related to family or career.

Outreach campaigns can help bring these "hard to find" ready adults back to institutions to complete their degrees. While these types of campaigns, when done effectively, can quickly escalate in cost, several states developed low-cost approaches. One strategy was to take advantage of free media exposure through local news stories that highlighted successful degree completers.

Outreach campaigns can also target employers or large pockets of potential ready adults, such as military bases, to spread the word about degree completion opportunities.

7. Examining the data to better understand ready adults is an important first step to serving them efficiently.

There are often misconceived notions about ready adults but examining the data can help determine what approaches are likely to be most effective. For instance, one myth surrounding ready adults is that they cannot handle the academic rigor of a postsecondary degree. Data from South Dakota and New Jersey suggested that these students mostly left due to financial reasons or because of obligations and responsibilities outside of school. South Dakota's analysis of its ready adults showed that they had slightly better GPAs and performance on state competency exams than all other students.[102]

The lessons here are twofold. First, there should not be significant concern that ready adults are

ill-prepared academically. Second, programs for returning adults must be able to meet needs and provide flexibility to help adults address these non-academic barriers should they arise again.

8. Flexibility to adjust policies and practices to meet the varied needs of ready adults is necessary to help them overcome barriers.

Project participants discovered quickly that flexibility was a crucial component of any effort to serve ready adults. While many institutions provide flexible course schedules to meet the needs of working students, policies and practices in other areas may be needlessly rigid making it more difficult for returning adults to complete their degrees.

Advisors working with returning adults found that they had to offer flexible schedules to meet these students' needs. Institutional business offices could not follow traditional hours and expect to meet the needs of adults who might be working during that time period. Similarly, state systems and institutions needed flexibility to address low grades students may have received previously after walking away from courses in the middle of the semester.

An emphasis on flexibility allowed states to meet the needs of students that previously might not have been able to return and complete their degrees. It is important to note that this flexibility must have limits and cannot give adults special treatment compared to traditional students.

Promising strategies. In addition to the general strategies that were effective for state and institutional leaders in addressing policy and practice barriers for ready adults, the project uncovered numerous barriers and potential strategies for addressing those barriers. The section below lists five general areas in which project participants identified specific barriers along with specific strategies and tools that states and institutions employed to address these barriers and provide clearer paths to degree completion for ready adults.

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1. Insufficient information—Adults with prior credit who are considering returning to college may not understand the opportunities available to complete their degrees. A related information gap is that faculty, administrators, and even state policymakers may not have an accurate understanding of this population.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Ready adults may not have considered returning to complete their degrees.
- Ready adults may not understand how close they are to a degree or that they have already met degree requirements.
- Institutions may not provide sufficient faculty/administration support for serving ready adults.
- Some may assume these students left because they were academically unqualified.

Promising strategies:

- **Targeted outreach**: Using data mining to identify former students who are close to degrees enables states and institutions to craft targeted outreach messages encouraging these ready adults to return to complete degrees. Although contact information may be out of date for these ready adults, states and institutions have used private sector data matching firms to obtain current information.
- **Broad public outreach campaigns:** Not all ready adults can be contacted through direct outreach. Some may have moved to the area or attended private institutions, meaning they would not show up in a data mining effort. Broader outreach campaigns, based on market research, that encourage adults to return to complete degrees can be effective.
- **Internal communication campaigns:** Outreach efforts should also work to build support among key stakeholders for serving ready adults. Developing state and institutional champions is crucial to long-term success.
- **Data analysis:** Understanding how this population performed when previously enrolled in postsecondary education can help eliminate myths about their readiness to handle high-level academic work.
- **Personalized advising:** Ready adults may have credits from multiple institutions or academic programs and need more robust advising to help them determine the best possible path to earn a degree or credential of value.

2. Inadequate institutional policy and practice—Most institutions assume that they serve non-traditional students well. Understanding institutional policies and practices from the student's perspective can help leaders identify any gaps.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Institutional policies and practices can be aimed at the "traditional student" even though adults comprise an ever larger share of student populations.
- Institutional policies often place students in developmental classes based solely on the results of high stakes tests.
- Many ready adults walked away from classes and were left with low grades impacting their ability to earn a degree.

Promising strategies:

- **Provide reentry concierges:** Many states and institutions are providing single points of contact for returning adults to navigate the reentry process.
- **Secret Shoppers:** Some states had "secret shoppers" pose as potential returning adults to better understand the reentry process from the student perspective.
- **Policy and practice audits:** Policy and practice audits help states and institutions understand how well they serve ready adults. Tools like CAEL's Adult Learner Focused Institution (ALFI) survey can identify areas for improvement.
- **Redesign gateway courses:** Many institutions have redesigned gateway courses, particularly college-level math, to improve both student success and institutional efficiency.
- **Academic amnesty:** Institutions and states can implement policies that allow students to eliminate grades that may have been due to simply walking away from school rather than sub-par academic performance.

3. Unintended consequences of state policies—Many state policymakers may be unaware of how well-intentioned policies can sometimes make it more difficult for returning adults to complete their degrees.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Established policies can prevent institutions from flexibly meeting needs of non-traditional students.
- Students may have accumulated significant credits toward a specialized degree, such as nursing or teaching, but were unable to complete a final requirement such as a practicum or student teaching.
- Institutional residency requirements can prolong time to degree for ready adults.

Promising strategies:

- **Formal communication processes:** States and institutions can establish formal communication processes between state policymakers and institutional leaders to identify and barriers and disseminate promising strategies.
- **Generalized degrees:** Offering generalized "parachute degrees" that allow students to apply credits earned in pursuit of a specialized major to a more general degree program can increase degree completion and prevent stopouts in the first place.
- **Flexibility to waive policies:** When appropriate, institutions should have the ability to waive certain academic residency requirements.

4. Lack of financial resources—Many of these students originally left college due to limited financial resources and may face the same difficulties upon returning.

Examples of barriers in practice:

- Many scholarship/financial aid opportunities are restricted to traditional students.
- Some working adults may not be able to afford full tuition payments at the outset of an academic semester.
- Some ready adults may have financial holds that prevent them from reenrolling.

Promising Strategies:

- **Financial aid policy audits:** States and institutions should analyze financial aid and scholarship opportunities to ensure that there are valid reasons for any programs that are limited to traditional students.
- **Payment plans:** Allowing students to make a monthly payment rather than requiring the full lump sum at the outset of the semester can ease the burden on those who may have cash flow challenges.
- **Flexible employee tuition reimbursement:** Employee tuition reimbursement plans should match the payment schedule required by institutions in order to lessen the burden on students to provide full payment up front.
- **Flexibility and forgiveness:** Providing flexibility, payment plans, or forgiveness can provide an incentive for adults to return to complete their degrees.

5. Limited time to dedicate to college—Returning adults may have significant obligations outside of school and must make the best use of their time in order to complete a degree quickly.

Examples of Barrier in practice:

- Ready adults often work full-time while completing coursework.
- Family obligations can compete with time needed for coursework.

Promising Strategies:

- **Flexible time:** States and institutions can pursue partnerships with employers that offer employees flexible schedules to attend postsecondary classes.
- **Flexible course scheduling:** Institutions should ensure that students have access to all courses they need to complete a degree outside of traditional hours.
- **Flexible schedules for student services:** Students who need courses outside of the traditional times also likely need to access student services, such as advising and institutional business offices outside of regular work hours.

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