Education Issue Brief

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How States and Institutions Can Work Together to Serve Adult Learners: Lessons from Adult Promise

When Lumina Foundation launched Adult Promise in 2017, it recognized states as the key driver of change in higher education finance and policy. In addition to making grants to state-level governing and coordinating bodies, the foundation partnered with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) to support grantee states in designing and implementing Adult Promise initiatives. However, as the SHEEO Adult Promise Design Template acknowledged, a wide variety of stakeholders—not only at the state level, but also at the regional, local, and institutional levels—are necessarily involved in increasing adult learner success, especially among historically underserved racial and ethnic communities.

This brief examines the various components of institutional readiness to serve adult learners, highlights the ways that state and institutional actors can work together to support such readiness, and describes institutions' perceptions of the state role. The document may be useful for state or higher education system leaders looking to better understand how to support institutions in their states, for institutional leaders looking to increase their own capacity to serve adult learners by working with the state, and for funders looking for ways to increase adult enrollment and completion in higher education.

Working with and learning from partner institutions

Among the 11 states included in the Adult Promise evaluation, 8 made financial sub-awards to institutions within their respective states: Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, and Oklahoma. Mathematica surveyed the formal institutional partners in these states. Respondents included 16 two-year colleges, 8 four-year colleges, and 6 other organizations that worked with partner institutions. We asked them about their work with the state to advance adult learners' success and their perceptions of the state's role. In general, institutional partners were satisfied with the supports offered by the state, but they suggested some areas for improvement. Key findings from the survey are shared throughout this brief.

The survey of Adult Promise institutional partners included

- **30** Respondent organizations
- **16** Two-year colleges
- **8** Four-year colleges
- **6** Other organizations

In 2017, Lumina Foundation launched the Adult Promise initiative with grants to five states (Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Washington) to develop and test innovative approaches to engage adult learners in higher education through improved outreach, financial supports, and other supportive services. The foundation expanded its work by making grants to seven additional states in 2018 (California, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, and Oregon), and to three more in 2019 (Arizona, Rhode Island, and Texas). In its role as the Adult Promise evaluation and learning partner, Mathematica has conducted formative and summative studies of the states' initiatives, focusing on the first two cohorts of grantee states. This brief distills key insights from the evaluation, drawing upon data from interviews with state leads, site visits to three grantee states, student focus groups, an institutional partner survey, and targeted document review.

The complementary roles of states and institutions

Institutions of higher education are, of course, essential to any student's success beyond high school. Although state agencies and system offices can play a central role in outreach to adult learners, institutions are the true point of entry into higher education for most students. Similarly, state legislatures and higher education governing bodies are typically responsible for important finance and policy decisions, but institutions package and distribute most student aid.

Indeed, institutions are where "the rubber meets the road" in the day-to-day student experience. They are home to teaching and learning, and they provide the bulk of supports for student success. Unfortunately, institutions can also pose many barriers to success, especially for learners who differ from the "traditional" college student—not only adults ages 25 to 64, but also people from communities that have been historically excluded from higher education, including Black, Hispanic, and Native American students.

Institutions have begun to recognize that they must do more to engage and support such students. At the same time, states can play a potentially important role in fostering institutional capacity to serve adult learners. A balanced approach encourages mutual understanding of states' and institutions' complementary roles and facilitates their ability to work together to support adult learners' success.

Understanding readiness to engage and serve adult learners in higher education

A large body of research, tools, and other resources can help both state and institutional stakeholders understand, assess, and improve their readiness to engage and serve adult learners. The SHEEO Adult Promise Design Template served as a point of departure for Adult Promise grantee states. Although it focused on state levers and strategies, it offered a checklist that included many examples of program parameters and activities centered on institutions' readiness to serve adults. Beyond this template, several grantee states worked with institutions to use the Adult Learner 360 assessment from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). And notably, as part of its Adult Promise grant-related activities, Washington State developed its own College and Career Compass Institutional Self-Assessment for institutional partners in the state. Each of these resources has a distinct perspective and objectives, but they highlight similar areas for consideration with respect to serving adult learners (Exhibit 1, next page).

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Exhibit 1. Resources for examining readiness to serve adult learners

Developer and tool name	Overview	Focus areas
State Higher Education Executive Officers SHEEO **ADULT PROMISE:** DESIGN TEMPLATE	Checklist of design considerations in six areas for states, regions, localities, and institutions seeking to develop promise programs for adult learners	▪ Survey landscape and need ▪ Engage stakeholders and earn their buy-in ▪ Design program ▪ Develop strategy and outreach for reengaging adult learners ▪ Estimate program costs ▪ Establish program evaluation strategy
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning Adult Learner 360 CATALYST FOR SUCCESS	Diagnostic tool that uses student and institutional surveys to assess institutional effectiveness at serving adult learners along 10 dimensions	▪ Adaptivity ▪ Strategic partnerships ▪ Teaching-learning process ▪ Technology ▪ Assessment of learning outcomes ▪ Transitions ▪ Financing ▪ Student support systems ▪ Life and career planning ▪ Outreach
Washington Student Achievement Council COLLEGE & CAREER COMPASS WASHINGTON **Institutional Self-Assessment**	Diagnostic tool that uses worksheets to structure reflection and planning in five key areas among cross-division campus teams at partner institutions seeking to develop strategies to serve adult learners	▪ Admissions and enrollment ▪ Academic programs ▪ Affordability ▪ Student supports ▪ Planning and evaluation

Looking across the topics covered by these various resources, several common areas emerge with respect to institutional capacity to engage and serve adult learners well: marketing and outreach; admissions and enrollment; academic programming; supportive services; financial aid and services; partnerships; and planning, evaluation, and accountability.

Although many considerations in each of these areas apply to all types of learners, there are opportunities and challenges in each area that are specific to adult learners. Likewise, institutions have broad responsibilities across all of these areas, but there may be a strategic role for the state in fostering institutional readiness to serve adults in each of them. State-level agencies and organizations can work with institutions in five key ways:

1. **Provide resources and expertise** focused on adult learners, which institutions may lack, especially in an environment of budget cuts and competing priorities

2. **Centralize information** so that adult learners can efficiently understand their options and make informed decisions

3. **Facilitate alignment and standardization** in some areas (for example, application processes, course numbering, program requirements) across institutions to promote accessibility and transferability

4. **Reduce barriers to equitable access** to adult-friendly programming for all adult learners across postsecondary sectors and geographic regions in the state

5. **Encourage innovation** by funding or otherwise supporting institutions to develop and test strategies before scaling them

Exhibit 2 summarizes considerations relevant to adult learners and highlights examples of the state role in each of the major areas of institutional capacity; the discussion that follows details exemplary efforts by Adult Promise states in each area.

Exhibit 2. How states can foster institutional readiness to serve adult learners

Focus area	Opportunities and challenges for adult learners	Examples of the state role from Adult Promise
Marketing and outreach	▪ Adult learners are diverse and dispersed—not a "captive audience" ▪ Some had negative experiences with college	**Provide resources and expertise focused on adult learners** ▪ Develop and test targeted messaging strategies ▪ Identify and train navigators, ambassadors, and other outreach staff **Centralize information** ▪ Develop one-stop portals and other tech-supported tools for engagement at scale
Admissions and enrollment	▪ Some adult learners face barriers to admission related to time away from school, access to and skills with technology, credit transfer, and other logistic and policy hurdles	**Reduce barriers to equitable access** ▪ Remove or reduce testing requirements; do not ask about criminal justice involvement **Facilitate alignment and standardization** ▪ Institute common application processes across all public institutions within or across sectors
Academic programming	▪ They might learn better with distinct pedagogical approaches—in particular, opportunities for application, self-direction, and reflection ▪ They have prior experience to build on—for example, with transfer credit from past college courses or formal credit for life experience and skills	**Centralize information** ▪ Create online tools to help students select a pathway that works well for them **Facilitate alignment and standardization** ▪ Expand credit for prior learning ▪ Articulate clear pathways; create common course numbering and program requirements across institutions and sectors
Supportive services	▪ They often balance education with work and family obligations ▪ Some adult learners lack digital literacy or feel out of place among their younger peers	**Provide resources and expertise focused on adult learners** ▪ Identify, train, or fund navigators to provide high-touch, customized support for adult learners **Encourage innovation** ▪ Work with campuses and community partners to develop creative approaches tailored to adults' needs
Financial aid/ services	▪ Some are ineligible for some types of aid (due to criteria related to age or credits accumulated) ▪ They often have greater financial obligations and responsibilities than their younger peers, sometimes including debt from prior college enrollment ▪ Most tools for assessing financial need are not built to capture the reality of adult learners' finances	**Reduce barriers to equitable access** ▪ Broaden and simplify eligibility criteria ▪ Establish institutional debt forgiveness or other debt management protocols for re-entering students **Facilitate alignment and standardization** ▪ Create common application processes for aid **Encourage innovation and centralize information** ▪ Work with state agencies, campuses, and community partners to use flexible funding streams ▪ Create benefits hubs to facilitate access to resources from various public programs
Partnerships	▪ They might need access to benefits and other resources that partner organizations can provide or facilitate ▪ Some might be hard to reach or mistrustful of higher education; they may be more reachable through community-based or other partner organizations ▪ They typically need to work; if employed, they may have access to tuition reimbursement or other supports from employers; if not employed, they may benefit from institutional partnerships with potential employers	**Provide resources and expertise focused on adult learners** ▪ Convene stakeholders from various public institutions, across higher education sectors ▪ Identify and train people working with adult learners inside and outside of institutions of higher education **Reduce barriers to equitable access** ▪ Work with people and organizations with deep ties to communities of color and other underserved communities **Encourage innovation** ▪ Support community partnerships among institutions, employers, public agencies, and other organizations serving adult learners and their families
Planning, evaluation, and accountability	▪ Enrollment decisions among them can be more sensitive to economic fluctuations than for students of traditional college age ▪ They may face barriers and opportunities related to their age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, prior college experience, or the intersection of such characteristics	**Centralize information and provide resources and expertise focused on adult learners** ▪ Develop statewide data systems and dashboards for institutional use with information relevant to adult learners

Adult Promise states' support for institutional readiness to serve adult learners
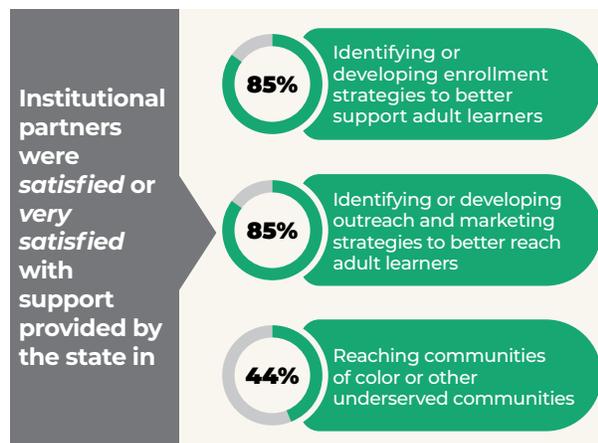
Adult Promise grantee states worked to foster institutional readiness to serve adults across all of the areas described in Exhibit 2, sometimes working at a state or system level, sometimes with a subset of institutions.

Outreach, marketing, admissions, and enrollment

Adult Promise states enhanced outreach, marketing, admissions, and enrollment by funding development and implementation of three key efforts: (1) messaging tailored to adult learners; (2) tech-based tools to facilitate adults' engagement, such as one-stop online portals for information, application, and enrollment; and (3) high-touch help for adults, primarily resources and training for college navigators and ambassadors.

These state-led strategies—which are detailed in a separate brief —were well received among institutional partners. Among the partners surveyed, large majorities (85 to 95 percent) were satisfied or very satisfied with the support the state provided with respect to outreach, marketing, and enrollment for adults. The one area where they perceived substantial room for improvement in state support was reaching adult learners from communities of color and other underserved communities (44 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the state's role in this).

Institutional partners were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with support provided by the state in

- **85%** Identifying or developing enrollment strategies to better support adult learners
- **85%** Identifying or developing outreach and marketing strategies to better reach adult learners
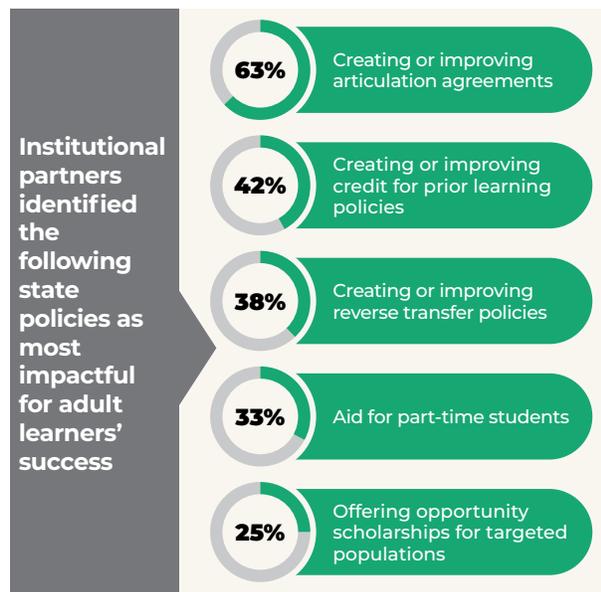- **44%** Reaching communities of color or other underserved communities

Removing barriers and standardizing requirements are other important ways states can enhance equity and help adults engage and enroll in higher education. Maine offers an example of an approach that stakeholders in every other Adult Promise state adopted, either at a system or institution level. Partly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education leaders in Maine enacted a policy change that made admissions and placement test scores (ACT, SAT, and ACCUPLACER) optional for applying to the state's two- and four-year public colleges; at the same time, the applications no longer include questions about prior disciplinary infractions and felony convictions. These changes can benefit adults and other underserved learners, in particular. Such learners may have less access to or comfort with standardized testing procedures, and their greater life experience may include past transgressions, sometimes exacerbated by racial and economic inequities in the justice system. These changes also helped standardize requirements across institutions and sectors in the state, easing the admissions process for all students. Although Maine's changes were defined as temporary (through the 2021–2022 academic year), other states have adopted permanent test-optional policies and policies restricting questions about criminal justice involvement.

Academic programming

States can help coordinate, clarify, and align academic standards across institutions, as well as across the two- and four-year college sectors. Historically, institutions have been the primary arbiter of program and course content and standards. However, variation across institutions can create significant obstacles for students seeking to transfer credits or to gain credit for prior learning, which can disproportionately affect adult learners. When asked to select the state policies and programs that had *most* influenced adult learners' success (from a dozen response options), Adult Promise institutional partners pointed most often to the creation or improvement of articulation agreements between institutions (63 percent) and the creation or improvement of credit for prior learning policies (42 percent).

Although there is limited extant evidence on articulation as a means to improve students' outcomes, institutional leaders viewed such policies as a key component for adult learners' ability to access an advantageous pathway, given their experience and goals.

Institutional partners identified the following state policies as most impactful for adult learners' success

- **63%** Creating or improving articulation agreements
- **42%** Creating or improving credit for prior learning policies
- **38%** Creating or improving reverse transfer policies
- **33%** Aid for part-time students
- **25%** Offering opportunity scholarships for targeted populations

An Adult Promise leader in Washington summarized a problem that many states shared: The decentralized structure of higher education, she said, created a landscape that was "programs rich and systems poor." In response to this challenge, several states developed online portals or other tools to centralize information on academic programs and pathways, sometimes customizing information based on the user's experience and interests. In Washington, the College and Career Compass tool was introduced in the context of a broader Guided Pathways initiative among the state's community and technical colleges, which sought to simplify and align program requirements and enhance articulation.

Several Adult Promise states helped institutions make academic programming more adult friendly by enhancing policies to honor credit for prior learning and advancing other curricular crosswalking efforts. Such approaches can help adult learners select a program and maximize the benefits of their past college, work, and life experiences. In North Carolina, higher education leaders recognized the problems that their bifurcated two- and four-year college systems could pose for underserved students.

In response, the state prioritized centralizing information and expanding credit for prior learning as part of its Adult Promise work. It built a new, centralized website with modules to guide students through the process of obtaining credit for prior learning, which included a chat bot to provide information tailored to adult learners. The state also funded training for community colleges on the newly developed policy addressing credit for prior learning, which one North Carolina leader described as "huge for adult learners." Although the two- and four-year college systems began working on their approaches to credit for prior learning separately, one leader observed that as more community college students transfer into the four-year system with such credits on their transcripts, it would "pave the way on the university level" and "force the hand" of the four-year colleges, necessitating more coordination. Similarly, Idaho developed a crosswalk of military prior learning assessments (PLAs) for its institutions' general education and common-indexed courses. The state hosted regional workshops to train institutional staff and faculty on PLAs and encourage alignment around using PLA for military and veteran students, ultimately developing a PLA community of practice.

Financial aid and supportive services

States play a pivotal role in determining how much state aid is available to students for higher education. State budgets have been under pressure for decades and resources for institutions—including student aid—have largely not been spared. State and federal pandemic recovery funds for institutions and students may, however, provide an opportunity for bucking these trends. At the same time, states can do a great deal to support institutions in easing the financial burdens placed on adult learners.

Adult Promise states sought to minimize barriers related to state aid by changing eligibility requirements and enhancing individual support for finding and accessing aid. For example, North Carolina repealed a state university policy that levied a tuition surcharge on students with more than 140 credit hours.

The policy's original intent was to encourage credential completion, but data showed that it affected learners at historically Black colleges and universities and American Indian-serving institutions more adversely than students at other institutions. Other states invested in navigators, people trained to help adult learners figure out the complex landscape of financial aid eligibility. Across the states that used navigators, stakeholders agreed that they were extremely helpful to adults seeking to understand and access the varied financial resources for which they might be eligible.

Grantees encouraged innovation and collaboration among state agencies, private and nonprofit entities, and public institutions to improve adult learners' access to a wide array of financial supports. For example:

Indiana strategically considered the aid available in the state and unified funding streams across public agencies so that learners did not have to deal with the various agencies overseeing different credit and noncredit programs. It also reduced financial barriers by applying a combination of state resources and federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding to create a series of fully funded credential programs in high-demand areas.

Kentucky worked with partner campuses to develop accelerated programs. In one case, classes for these programs met one evening per week to minimize burden on adults seeking to balance education with job and family obligations. To further sweeten the deal, the state provided child care and dinner as part of the class for participating students and their families.

Oklahoma tapped foundation funding to provide scholarships and then worked with employer partners to identify students who might pursue credentials in specific high-demand fields.

Washington overhauled its state aid system to create an aid entitlement for eligible students, including adults. It worked with institutions, United Way, and other private entities to offer emergency aid and debt forgiveness, as well as to improve students' access to workforce, income support, housing, and food assistance programs by centralizing information and applications at "benefits hubs" on some partner campuses.

States typically play a secondary role in developing and delivering supportive services for students. Interestingly, however, institutional partners were more satisfied with their respective states' roles in identifying or developing such services than with their role in providing financial supports. Although a large majority of institutional respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the state's help in identifying or developing supports for adult learner success and completion (93 percent), smaller proportions were as pleased with the state's provision of financial supports for adult learners beyond tuition (for example, for child care, food, or housing; 52 percent) or for direct educational expenses (for example, for tuition, fees, or books; 63 percent). These sentiments might at first seem surprising, especially in the context of Adult Promise, which emphasized state financial commitments to adult learners.

Institutional partners were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with support provided by the state in

- 93% Identifying or developing supports for adult student success and completion
- 52% Providing financial supports for adult learners' costs beyond tuition
- 63% Providing financial supports for adult learners' direct educational expenses
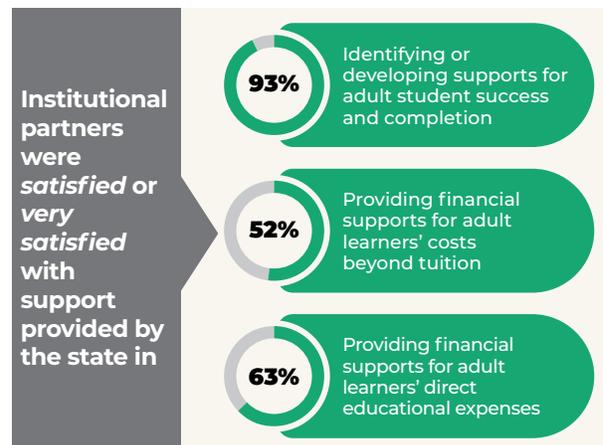
They are also counterintuitive insofar as they represent a kind of reversal of the typical state and institutional roles—that is, where the state drives financial policy while institutions shape supportive services. However, these findings could reflect the struggle many states experienced to identify any additional resources for higher education, let alone resources earmarked for adults.

Moreover, precisely because states are not typically involved in developing supportive services, that Adult Promise states did offer some help in this sphere may have encouraged an especially favorable impression among institutional partners.

Partnerships

States can facilitate the development of broader networks among institutions, other public agencies, and community organizations. This was a primary activity in Adult Promise initiatives, reflected in high levels of satisfaction in these areas among their institutional partners: institutions were overwhelmingly satisfied with the support their states provided for such partnership development (89 percent) and for their convening support (93 percent).

Institutional partners were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with support provided by the state in

89% Building partnerships to better reach and/or serve adult learners

93% Convening to share promising practices

Several states used Adult Promise explicitly to convene stakeholders within and across sectors to enhance collaboration among their public colleges:

In **North Carolina,** state support for convening stakeholders across the two-year and four-year systems helped foster a more collaborative approach between institutions that were otherwise often competing for resources and students.

Ohio established an Adult Learner Working Group whose membership included executives, faculty, and program directors from across the state's universities and technical and community colleges. The group spread its work across four subgroups focused on high-impact practices, return on investment, closing equity gaps, and policy improvements.

It developed recommendations geared toward distinct audiences, including post-secondary governing boards; campus leaders, faculty, and staff; and state policymakers.

Washington's institutional self-assessment (described in Exhibit 1) was part of an intense effort to gain buy-in for the initiative from institutions around the state. The state intentionally structured the tool to support reflection and actively sought to foster a learning community among institutional partners using the tool to share the successes and challenges they faced in improving their readiness to serve adults.

Maine offers an interesting example of an Adult Promise initiative centered on the cultivation of state and local partnerships. Here, grant funds—awarded to the Maine Development Foundation rather than a higher education governing or coordinating body—supported organizational capacity building and connections among partners in two pilot communities, coupled with training and convening of college staff and development and training of a statewide network of navigators. Leaders in Maine echoed their peers in other states in highlighting the importance of both organizational partners and individual staff or volunteers with deep ties in and credibility with underserved communities. They viewed these "boots on the ground" as a key to connecting with immigrant and Native American communities and other adult learners of color.

Planning, evaluation, and accountability

Adults are a relatively new population of interest to higher education, which elevates the importance of planning, evaluation, and accountability activities focused on their outcomes. Institutions of higher education have a wealth of data on all of their students, but they sometimes lack resources or capacity to fully take advantage of it. Moreover, many issues that are especially relevant for understanding adult learners—such as student transfer—require tracking people across institutions and sectors, which can be challenging even for the strongest institutional research offices. States typically have broader analytic resources and can support institutions in this work.

In several Adult Promise states, lead agencies and key partners worked together to develop systems to help institutions understand and monitor adult learners' application, enrollment or reenrollment, and progress. Examples include:
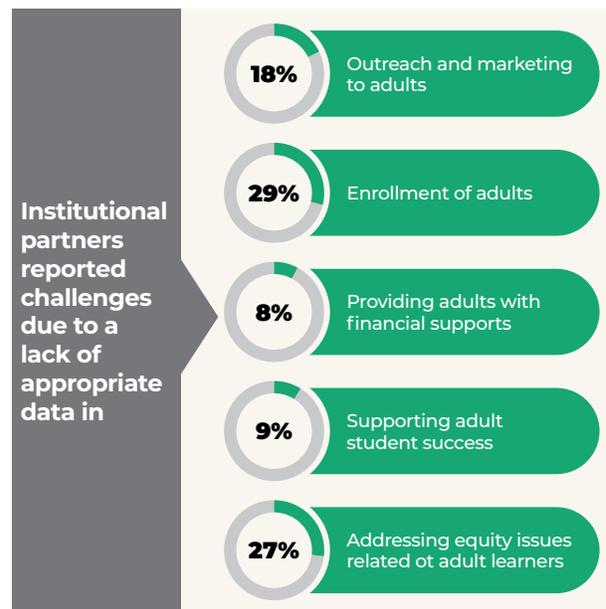
The University of **Hawaii** system created STAR GPS Registration, a client relationship management (CRM) tool for tracking returning adults system-wide. Institutions used the CRM dashboards to understand where and when adults return to higher education and for tracking applications, registrations, and enrollments. Leaders in the state saw the tool as critical for increasing institutional awareness and shifting mindsets about the opportunities and challenges specific to adult learners.

North Carolina expanded a tool developed by Wake Technical Community College called Finish First North Carolina. The tool analyzes student transcripts simultaneously against all program criteria to identify potential credential completers. It can segment students into three categories: (1) completed credential but has not applied to graduate, (2) incomplete credential with a small number of courses to finish, or (3) incomplete credential with a large number of courses remaining. Based on the category a student falls into, institutions can target messaging about their degree options and timelines for completion. The tool identified more than 50,000 students with unawarded credentials and nearly 250,000 within one term of graduation.

Oregon created a comprehensive statewide database of students with some college but no degree. It consolidated data from several state agencies, including data on employment and unemployment insurance, participation in social welfare programs, and residency.

The resulting database—which was complemented by qualitative information from focus groups with adults—helped the state to better understand the complexities around adults' engagement with higher education and other public programs, which it hoped could help shape strategy on adults across institutions and agencies.

Developing resources is a first step, but additional work is needed to encourage institutions to use them. Oregon leaders lamented that the data resources they developed to identify students were underused and suggested that their efforts would have benefitted from more attention to stakeholder buy-in, research questions, and goals before developing the database. Washington anticipated such challenges and made a concerted effort to gain institutional buy-in and promote shared learning as it gathered the underlying data for its College and Career Compass tool. Washington leaders did this through in-person, on-campus visits, and they developed formal participation agreements to commit institutions to regularly providing data for the tool.

Institutional partners reported challenges due to a lack of appropriate data in

18%	Outreach and marketing to adults
29%	Enrollment of adults
8%	Providing adults with financial supports
9%	Supporting adult student success
27%	Addressing equity issues related ot adult learners

Adult Promise states' emphasis on data supports that helped students and institutions understand and find each other aligned with institutions' needs as reported in the institutional partner survey.

Institutional respondents cited the lack of appropriate data as a challenge to implementing outreach and marketing to adults (18 percent) and enrollment of adults (29 percent) at least twice as often as they viewed inadequate data as a challenge to providing financial supports (8 percent) or supports for student success (9 percent). More than a quarter (27 percent) of institutional respondents also viewed a lack of appropriate data as a challenge to addressing equity issues. These findings likely reflect the fact that institutions typically have fairly robust internal data systems and are able to track students fairly well once they are enrolled. In contrast, their systems cannot offer much to track adults who have stopped or dropped out, or who have not previously enrolled. Simply tracking adults' current address is often a challenge—an issue which Oregon addressed by partnering with the state Driver and Motor Vehicles division within the state department of transportation. Although data challenges remain, Adult Promise institutional partners appear to have appreciated the states' efforts to help address them, as 81 percent of partners reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their state's support for data use and sharing.

Where states could do more: Tailoring services and centering equity

Adult Promise states initially focused on helping institutions better identify, engage, and enroll adult learners in higher education. With time, however, they realized that it is not enough to bring adult learners in—institutions and programs have to be ready to support them through to completion. As one state leader in Oklahoma insightfully quipped, "What you do to catch them [adult learners] is what you need to do to keep them." Put another way, institutions and other stakeholders need to promote adults' completion of higher education with the same intensity that they promote their enrollment.

Institutional partners were largely satisfied with state supports, but point to areas for growth

The Adult Promise institutional partner survey asked respondents about their satisfaction with the various types of support provided by the state-level organization that oversaw the grant. Across most areas, about 9 of 10 respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their state's support. However, two areas showed more room for improvement: About a quarter of respondents were *not satisfied* with (1) financial supports for adult learners' costs beyond tuition (for example, child care, food, housing) and (2) reaching communities of color or other underserved communities.

Institutional partners were *not satisfied* with support provided by the state in

22% Providing financial supports for adult learners' costs beyond tuition (e.g., childcare, food, housing)

22% Reaching communities of color or other underserved communities
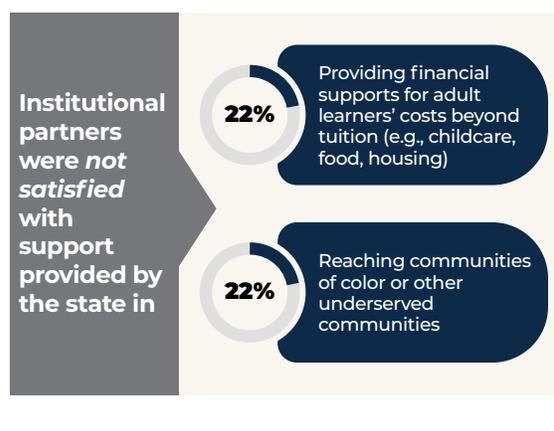
Yet Adult Promise states tailored supportive services for adult learners much less than they tailored their outreach and marketing to adults. Interviews and surveys conducted with institutional staff, and focus groups with students, echo extant research in highlighting the critical need to help adults balance the demands of family and work with education. Supporting such balance should be a key consideration in tailoring supports for adult learners.

"What you do to catch [adult learners] is what you need to do to keep them."

—*Oklahoma state leader*

As states enhance supportive services for adults, it is critical for them to center their efforts on learners who have been historically underserved. Higher education stakeholders at both the state and institutional level have begun to recognize the importance of the intersection of age, race, and other factors to students' educational success beyond high school. Although the various resources that helped states and institutions understand and respond to adult learners' needs (including the assessment resources described in Exhibit 1) took equity into consideration, most did not center on it. Few widely available materials focus explicitly on equity *and* adult learners. Indeed, the field could benefit from more research in this area.

In the meantime, states may wish to consider using some of the many tools and improvement processes developed by higher education stakeholders seeking to improve equity in student outcomes. Most of these involve careful and intentional data disaggregation, within the context of which institutions could examine adults.

In addressing these areas for improvement, states should build upon the lessons of Adult Promise and work closely with their institutions, ensuring a balanced approach that acknowledges both state and institutional roles and their complementary nature. With both parties' involvement, adult learners should be poised to enter higher education with a robust system of supports that aid them from enrollment to completion.

Connecting to the Adult Promise Evaluation

This brief addresses one component of the Adult Promise Evaluation. Other publications examine the range of work that states completed under the Adult Promise grants:

- Equity and adult college completion
- Supporting adult learners from enrollment to completion
- Outreach and enrollment strategies to engage adult learners

Our project site and interactive site provide more information about the Adult Promise evaluation.

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