ESG | Education Strategy Group

The Adult-Ready Playbook

A Comprehensive Policy and Practice Guide to Improve Outcomes for Post-traditional Learners

2021

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About Education Strategy Group

Education Strategy Group (ESG) works with America's education, business, and civic leaders to expand economic opportunity and mobility by increasing educational attainment. We are driven by the conviction that a robust education system aligned with workforce demands leads to a stronger, more equitable society.

Accelerating Recovery Through Credentials (ARC)

With the generous support of Ascendium Education Group and The Kresge Foundation, Education Strategy Group is leading *Accelerating Recovery through Credentials,* a comprehensive effort to improve outcomes for post-traditional learners. This phase of ARC includes developing a scalable policy and practice framework with accompanying guides — the Rapid Response Toolkit and this Adult-Ready Playbook — that will help higher education institutions and states develop the systems and structures needed to better serve adult or post-traditional learners. Together, the Toolkit and the Playbook are intended to promote acquisition of postsecondary credentials of value that lead to jobs with a family-sustaining wage and promote economic recovery in a post-COVID-19 context.

The first set of resources, the *Rapid Response Toolkit*, was released in March 2021 and equips decisionmakers with resources to quickly act on strategies to assist workers and learners displaced by the pandemic. The focus areas and strategies in the Toolkit were prioritized based on their ability to quickly and efficiently reach, equip, and support these learners. The Rapid Response Toolkit provides a starting point from which larger, more systemic efforts, like the ones identified in this playbook, can be built to transform the higher education system for post-traditional students.

The second resource, this *Adult-Ready Playbook,* will help leaders take a more holistic and reform-minded approach to serving adult learners and transform into Adult-Ready systems and institutions. Expanding beyond the scope of reskilling displaced workers, it synthesizes existing exemplary state and institutional policies and practices to refocus education and training systems to meet the needs of a very diverse population of post-traditional learners (re)entering education with a wide range and variance in skills. These include increasing accessibility, reforming programs, adapting operations, strengthening data systems and fostering new partnerships.

This Playbook is intended to serve as a resource for action, supporting state policymakers and institutional leaders with resources and tools enabling adult learners to effectively thrive within a post-pandemic economy.

The Adult-Ready Playbook: Overview

Introduction

Higher education is facing a watershed moment in 2021 and the immediate years to come. COVID-19 and the resulting economic shifts have created massive job displacement[1] and significant numbers of people who are looking to reskill to continue their careers. In fact, over 37 million Americans work in industries impacted by the pandemic.[2] Institutional leaders are seeking to address enrollment declines – both from the pandemic and current demographic trends.[3] State leaders in higher education and workforce agencies have an opportunity to address the demands for a robust workforce and effective talent pool. These pressures have called attention to the adult or "post-traditional" learner and higher education's readiness to support them.[4] Although a postsecondary credential is needed now more than ever to be successful in the labor market,[5] the centuries-old model for higher education, designed for full-time students enrolling directly out of high school, does not provide the flexibility and industry-responsiveness that these learners desire or deserve.

While much has been written about the ways higher education must shift to better serve post-traditional learners, few have attempted to pull together the most promising strategies into a single, yet comprehensive, framework that re-envisions education for this population. Part of the challenge is that these learners are not a singular group; they come to higher education with a range of skills, goals, and life contexts. However, there are ways to develop systems that are more responsive to the ways that post-traditional learners tend to approach postsecondary education and training. **This playbook synthesizes the existing research and best practices to put forward a holistic and reform-minded process that higher education leaders can use to refocus education**

and training systems to meet the needs of a very diverse population of adult learners; it can be used to harness lessons learned in order to achieve a more adult-ready system of higher education.

Defining "Adult Learner"

In this playbook, we define adult learners as those beginning their undergraduate enrollment at the age of 25 or older. This definition and age threshold align with decades of literature that has favored age (especially being over the age of 24) as the common, defining characteristic for this population.[6] According to the literature, age acts as a proxy to capture a large and diverse population of adult students whose life circumstances — attending part-time, working, having dependents, not having a high school diploma — can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives.[7]

While the National Center for Education Statistics and much of the field uses the language "non-traditional" to describe these learners, this playbook will hereby refer to adult learners as "post-traditional" learners. This term, used by the American Council on Education and other leading researchers, offers more humanizing language and acknowledges that students with "non-traditional" characteristics are now the norm in postsecondary education.[8]

1   Berube, A., & Bateman, N. (2020, April). *Who are the workers already impacted by the COVID-19 recession?* The Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-are-the-workers-already-impacted-by-the-covid-19-recession/

2   Ibid.

3   National Center for Education Statistics. (2021, April 29). *Stay informed: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's Regular Updates on Higher Education Enrollment.* https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/

4   National Center for Education Statistics. 2009. Digest of Educational Statistics 2009. Table 192. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions by control and type of institution, age, and attendance status of student: 2007). http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_192.asp?referrer=list

5   Carnevale, A., Jayasundera, T., & Gulish, A. (2016). *America's divided recovery: College haves and have-nots. Center on Education and the Workforce.* https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Americas-Divided-Recovery-web.pdf

6   National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Nontraditional undergraduates: Definitions and data.* National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp

7   Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 485–540; M. Cleveland-Innes. (1994). Adult student dropout at postsecondary institutions. *Review of Higher Education*, 17 (4) (1994); and Hurtado, S., Kurotsuchi, K., and Sharp, S. (1996). *Traditional, Delayed Entry, and Nontraditional Students* [Conference presentation]. American Educational Research Association.

8   Soares, L. (2013, January). *Post-traditional learners and the transformation of postsecondary education: A manifesto for college leaders.* American Council on Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Post-traditional-Learners.pdf

Seize the Opportunity: From Recovery to Reform

Now is the time to dramatically rethink higher education's approach to serving the post-traditional learner. During the pandemic, institutions, systems, and states moved quickly to adapt to new modes of course, operations, and service delivery. Nimbleness in the face of crises is evidence that dramatic, timely reform is possible. But it should not stop there.

The work of educating and serving post-traditional learners cannot be about returning to the norm of pre-pandemic ways. This is a moment to reflect on the learning and adaptation that faculty, staff, administrators, and students have led and experienced during the pandemic and formalize this innovation through policies and new structures. The availability of federal stimulus funds and other potential investments in higher education and training that could flow out of the infrastructure package being discussed provides an opportunity for institutions, systems, and states to invest in the future. This is also a moment to assess who our institutions and systems are serving and ask ourselves which populations are being left out and why. Leaders would benefit from examining groups of students by age and other demographic factors to better understand where students are likely to come from and where gaps exist in who is being served. As we turn to face the future, we must prioritize shifting systems and policies to serve these students and commit to the pursuit of equitable outcomes for all learners.

Towards Being Ready for the Diverse & Multifaceted Post-Traditional Learner

When thinking about how to best serve these learners, it is important to recognize that they do not fit neatly into a single category. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates approximately 85% of college students have characteristics of a "post-traditional" learner.[9] Post-traditional learners consist of individuals at a variety of points in their educational journey – from those without a high school diploma to those with some college but no degree to learners with degrees seeking to add to their knowledge to individuals educated in other countries who have found that their credentials are not transferable. Post-traditional learners also come with varying backgrounds, socio-economic status and life circumstances. Of the 85% of postsecondary students that would be considered post-traditional, a vast majority are Pell Recipients. Indeed, the average age of Pell Recipients is 26, and has risen in recent years.[10] Further, nearly a quarter of postsecondary students are parents (3.9 million), with half being unmarried.[11] They have full-time (43%) or part-time (81%) jobs.[12] They are veterans (6%).[13] They are Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian, and White. They differ in gender identity. They are incarcerated learners and returning citizens.

Serving post-traditional learners requires shifting systems to recognize the value they bring to the institution as learners as well as to be more responsive to their identities and complex lives. By developing a vision to more effectively serve post-traditional learners, there is value in acknowledging and honoring the unique backgrounds and traits that each population brings. It necessitates seeing the intersectionalities between populations in terms of characteristics. A refugee may also be a single parent; a GED learner may also be a returning citizen; an older worker in need of reskilling may also be a veteran.

Although post-traditional learners come to the postsecondary system with varying backgrounds and needs, they face common challenges within a system that is often ineffective in meeting their needs. For instance, many post-traditional learners are balancing family, work, and learning, so they need programs that fit within their lives. Adult learners are typically capable and goal-focused, but may need additional support to navigate their postsecondary options. For most post-traditional learners, easy on-ramps and off-ramps into careers are an urgent priority. Learning that feels relevant and inclusive is important. Programs offered in a flexible and affordable manner are essential. **Perhaps the tie that binds this diverse population of learners together most aptly is a nearly universal desire to strive for themselves and their families, whether that is through updating skill sets, increasing earning potential, starting a new career path, or setting an example for children and family members. Systems of higher education can and must be designed to embrace this.**

The Intersection of Racism, Classism, and the Post-Traditional Experience

It is important to recognize that many post-traditional learners have been impacted by the effects of systemic racism, income inequality, and cycles of poverty. While fully unpacking and addressing the racist and classist structures that holistically affect post-traditional learners' ability to access and succeed in postsecondary (e.g. redlining that prohibits access to quality elementary and secondary schools, over-policing and racial profiling that disportionately place Black and Brown individuals in the criminal justice system, biased hiring processes and procedures that exclude certain populations from high-paying careers, etc.) is critical, this playbook only goes so far to address the systemic and structural barriers created and upheld by the higher education system that most significantly impact those at or over the age of 25 (e.g. financial aid systems that favor traditional students, exclusionary college recruitment and admissions practices, course structures that prohibit an individual's ability to hold a full-time job and/or have a family). While many of these structures are rooted in racism and classism and, inevitably, acting on the strategies laid out in this playbook will begin to address them, more can and should be done to apply an anti-racist and anti-classist lens to the work of serving post-traditional learners.

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[9] U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). The condition of education 2010.

[10] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2007–08 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:08) and the 2009 follow-up to the 2003–04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09).

[11] Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2021). *Student parent success initiative.* IWPR. https://iwpr.org/higher-education-spsi/

[12] National Center for Education Statistics (2020, May). *College student employment.* NCES. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ssa

[13] Holian, L. & Adam, T. (2020, March). *Stats in brief–Veteran's education benefits: A profile of military students who received federal veterans' education benefits in 2015-2016.* (Report No. NCES2020-488rev). U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2020488REV

Achieving Adult-Ready Transformation

There is immense opportunity and immense challenge in effecting change in higher education that will demonstrably improve the success of post-traditional learners. The work will not be easy. It will not be quick. There will likely be setbacks along the way. There will be a need for leadership, ongoing discussion, planning, analysis, and continuous improvement. Stakeholders across all levels — students, faculty and administrators, employers, and state and community leaders — will all need to weigh in and work together.

It is important to note that this emphasis on post-traditional learners is not to the exclusion of other learners; rather the opposite is true. While some post-traditional learners face unique challenges as a result of their age and circumstances, many of the supports that would be enacted to serve them can and will benefit "traditional-aged" students. In other words, **in modifying our systems and structures to better serve post-traditional learners, the experiences of all modern learners will be improved**. Moreover, it is a balancing of resources and approaches to reflect the distribution of students enrolled in postsecondary education in your state or institution.

A Note on Intended Audiences

This playbook is not intended to apply to all institutions or to all states in the same way. Rather, for institutions, it is designed for those that already enroll a significant proportion of learners at or over the age of 25. For states, it is an opportunity to build a stronger talent pool to meet economic needs as well as support post-traditional learners most in need of attention. Gaining this understanding requires a thoughtful unpacking of enrollment and outcomes data to determine who is and is not being served across age and other factors that shape identity. In many cases, the data will show that it is regional comprehensive universities and community colleges that educate the majority of post-traditional learners. While other institutions should acknowledge and address the needs of post-traditional as an emerging norm in higher education, these institutions are best positioned to take advantage of this playbook. For them, not changing is not an option. Increasingly their students and their bottom lines depend on their ability to provide a flexible and responsive education and training experience.

Priorities for Adult-Ready Transformation

The Adult-Ready Playbook sets a framework for how institutions and systems can comprehensively serve post-traditional learners through five priorities for adult-ready transformation – **Accessibility, Program Change, Operational Change, Data, and Partnerships.** The five priority areas were developed after conducting research on best practices, interviewing leaders, and engaging subject matter experts. Together, these five priorities and accompanying strategies capture what it will take for institutions and states to serve post-traditional learners effectively.

Each of the five priorities has multiple strategies and actions for implementation. Leaders should strive to ensure implementation of at least one strategy within each of the five priorities. **Each strategy that has been selected has been implemented and shown to improve outcomes for post-traditional learners.** For each of the five priorities, an Action Guide has been developed that provides examples and further unpacks the outlined strategies into specific actions to implement, improve and go to the next level.

The **Accessibility** priority strives to intentionally address the pragmatic access, on-boarding, and progression questions that post-traditional learners tend to bring to postsecondary education. These strategies are about providing clear information on programs, providing effective student aid targeted towards post-traditional learners, and comprehensive approaches to outreach. Accessibility goes beyond initial marketing information and on-ramps. It requires making it possible for more populations of post-traditional learners to gain entry to postsecondary programs, whether through policies that open the front doors wider or through funding that is specifically geared towards those at or over the age of 25. More details are available in the Action Guide, but notable examples include Washington Student Achievement Council's expanded eligibility for the Washington College Grant at the state level and Pueblo Community College's Return to Earn program.

Program Change promotes strategies to ensure that post-traditional learners thrive and feel engaged within postsecondary classrooms by addressing approaches that shift the structure and delivery of courses and programs. Some selected strategies to implement include building faculty capacity for andragogy and active learning through professional development, modifications to course pace, frequency, and scheduling, and building effective on-ramps for students at or below

high-school proficiency. More details are available in the Action Guide, but notable examples include University of Hawaii's 5 Week Programs that accelerates courses through the state community college system and Pima Community College's approach to Integrated Education and Training that leverages Ability to Benefit.

The **Operational Change** priority articulates strategies that enable post-traditional learners to more easily navigate postsecondary advising and administrative systems. More specifically, strategies to address this include integrating student services in a centralized location, eliminating barriers across administrative offices, and developing efficient systems for tailored student advising such as deploying navigators. More details are available in the Action Guide, but notable examples include Missouri Manufacturing Workforce Innovation Networks (MO Manufacturing WINS) that built capacity for intrusive advising and Central Piedmont Community College's partnership with Single Stop USA that enhanced access to benefits and aligned administrative functions.

The **Data** priority suggests building capacity and standards to ensure post-traditional learners are effectively captured and monitored through data. The Action Guide puts forward several strategies and examples to strengthen data measurement and collection systems to better monitor and evaluate adult learner outcomes. Indiana created several reports that include valuable data relevant to post-traditional students through their certificate report, transfer report and enrollment dashboard all provide valuable data relevant to older students and students who pursue degrees or transfer.

The **Partnerships** priority recognizes the need to create deeper connections to industry and community to provide learners with an integrated learning experience from on-ramps through to off-ramps. Strategies to achieve this priority include engaging employer and workforce systems to promote relevance and partnering to provide critical wrap-around support services. More details are included in the Action Guide, but Columbus State Community College and Franklin University's Exact Track program done in conjunction with Huntington Bank provides advancement focused learning opportunities for bank employees.

Accessibillity

Post-traditional learners effectively access and move through postsecondary programs. Strategies to achieve this priority are:

- Ensure institutional and state aid works for post-traditional learners;
- Use financial levers to increase postsecondary engagement and progression for key post-traditional populations; and
- Conduct comprehensive outreach to all post-traditional learners.

Program Change

Post-traditional learners thrive and feel engaged within postsecondary classrooms. Strategies to achieve this priority are:

- Deliver program content in adult friendly ways;
- Design programs for flexibility and convenience; and
- Develop pathways that leverage and support all skill and preparation levels.

Priorities for Adult-Ready Transformation

Operational Change

Post-traditional learners easily navigate postsecondary advising and administrative systems. Strategies to achieve this priority are:

- Create a one-stop student experience; and
- Develop efficient systems for tailored student advising.

Data

Post-traditional learners are authentically measured through data and used as a subject for ongoing improvement. Strategies to achieve this priority are:

- Strengthen data measurement and collection systems to better monitor and evaluate adult learner outcomes.

Partnerships

Post-traditional learners seamlessly interface between higher education systems and trusted community/industry partners. Strategies to achieve this priority are:

- Engage employer and workforce systems to promote relevance; and
- Partner to provide critical wrap-around supports.

Tools to Move Forward

The Adult-Ready Playbook provides several tools to assist leaders in achieving transformation to better serve post-traditional learners. In addition to providing Action Guides for each of the five priorities, three additional documents accompany this Playbook. The User's Guide frames steps to put these priorities into action by building on two Adult-Ready Self-Assessments — one for institutions and one for states. These self-assessments are provided to identify assets and strategies to build upon, improve processes, and determine which strategies to prioritize next. Taken together, these tools offer leaders approaches to engage in continuous improvement processes to improve outcomes for post-traditional learners. They offer a framing for action and suggestions for process improvement to choose which priorities, strategies and actions to address immediately and which to take on at a later date.

Nothing about transformation is easy. And certainly changing a system that was designed during a different era for a singular learner will require multiple stakeholders at multiple levels of state and institutional leadership to be successful. While leadership at the institutional level, including administrators and faculty, will need to step up to achieve many of the priorities and strategies in this playbook, state leaders and policymakers play a critical role in enabling and scaling efforts underway. Therefore, to truly shift the paradigm in higher education, both state and institutional leaders must work together to effect change. The promise in this opportunity is to change the rules, reshape the systems, and redefine what higher education means in 2021 and beyond. In taking these steps, we will better serve all learners and our broader communities. Economies will be strengthened, equity gaps will be closed, and states and regions will be more competitive.