



INDIANA COMMISSION *for*
HIGHER EDUCATION



INDIANA PARTNERSHIP PENTAGON

MEETING THREE | ISSUE BRIEF

WHO ARE TODAY'S ADULT LEARNERS?

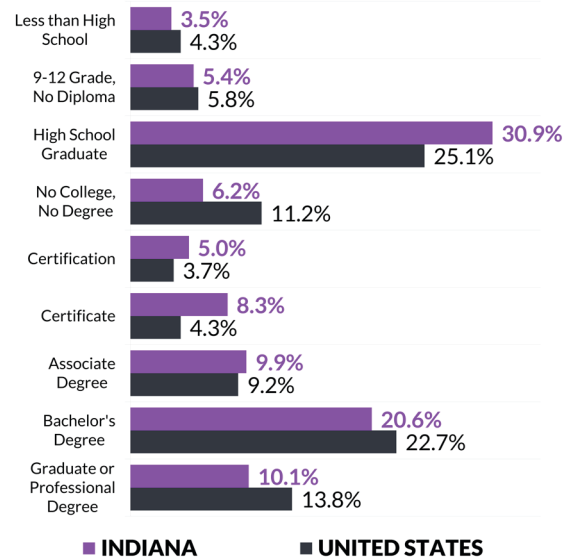
Adult Learners Nationwide

Postsecondary education has been an integral component of America since The Great Society in the 1960s. The passage of the [Higher Education Act of 1965](#) expanded America's postsecondary education by making it more accessible and affordable to all. The number of students participating in higher education has continued to increase since its passage, but today's generation of students has unique needs, requiring the higher education landscape to adjust to meet those needs.

Historically, a "traditional" college student is generally considered to be someone who enrolls in college full time immediately after graduating from high school, is financially dependent on their parent(s)/guardian(s), and is not currently employed full-time. However, in recent years, institutions of higher education across the nation have served a more diverse population of students that demonstrates that most students do not fit that traditional definition.

In 2018, about [55 percent](#) of jobs in Indiana required a postsecondary degree of some kind and about [46 percent](#) of the working age population in Indiana does not have a postsecondary degree. Thus, Indiana's goal is to increase the percentage of working-age adults with a postsecondary degree to [60 percent](#) by 2025.

Indiana Postsecondary Attainment By Credential Type



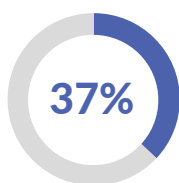
[Data Source](#)

Adult Learners in Indiana

As of 2021, [1 in every 4 students](#) enrolled in an undergraduate institution in Indiana is an adult learner, age 25 or older. Broadly stated, in Indiana, about 2 million adults do not have a credential. Among this population, approximately 40 percent have some college, no degree.

Adult learners are more likely to be financially independent and have more financial responsibilities, yet they are [11.6 percentage points](#) less likely to

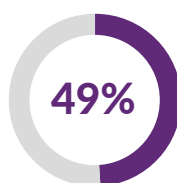
Characteristics of Today's Higher Education Student Population in the U.S.



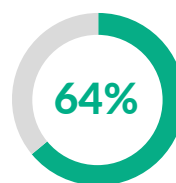
25 or older



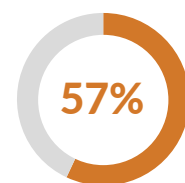
Have Children Or Other Dependents



Financially Independent



Work at Least Half Time



Live Independently

[Source](#)

receive financial aid than traditional undergraduate students. A lack of awareness of financial aid opportunities may be a contributing factor, as those who do apply for and receive financial aid are more likely to receive a federal Pell Grant than traditional students.

Current Postsecondary Pathways for Adult Learners

As the demographics of higher education and workforce needs continue to change, there is a growing recognition of the value different types of credentials provide for students. Postsecondary pathways are the varying opportunities students may pursue to become college and career ready and are often associated with increased median wages. Many are stackable—providing a seamless foundation for earning the next highest credential level—and some may be combined with employer-provided training or apprenticeship programs. General postsecondary pathways include:

- **Industry Credentials:** Vocational certifications, licenses, or badges that are recognized by local, state, or national business and industry partners. Industry credentials help prepare individuals to work in a specific industry, often in an entry-level position and/or advance their career through skill mastery. These credentials typically are not for college credit but may be evaluated by colleges and universities for awarding credit for prior learning.
- **Workforce Training Programs:** Programs that offer students new and/or improved skills often aligned to a specific industry. Technical trade programs are often workforce training programs but may also be categorized as industry credentials based on state and federal regulations.
- **Certificates:** Awards that usually require less than one or two years to complete and prepare individuals for middle-skill jobs (such as nurses and welders). These short-term credentials quickly prepare individuals for jobs that are important to local economies. Many certificates can be applied toward a higher-level certificate or degree, such as an associate degree. These credentials build, or

stack, upon one another, which allow students to use prior knowledge and continue their education at their own pace.

- **Associate Degrees:** An undergraduate academic program that aims to give students basic knowledge and skills that can be used toward employment or further study. Most associate degrees can be conferred in two years and are often completed at a community college.
- **Bachelor's Degrees:** Undergraduate academic degree awarded by a college or university usually after four years of study. A bachelor's degree is a prerequisite for further courses in graduate education.
- **Graduate Education:** Academic or professional degrees, certificates, diplomas, or other qualifications pursued by postsecondary students who have earned an undergraduate degree. Graduate education provides students with more advanced learning in a specialized discipline making them an expert in that topic of study.

What Supports Do Adult Learners Need?

Financial Support

Adult learners are more likely to have additional financial responsibilities that traditional students might not, like healthcare payments, mortgage, or children. These factors, on top of the cost of tuition, are some of the biggest barriers to pursuing postsecondary education for adult learners.

Child care and social support

Many adult learners are also full-time parents, making childcare a priority in pursuing postsecondary education or not. As [childcare costs](#) continue to climb, institutions and employers might consider providing childcare or offering financial assistance for childcare.

Emotional Support

Many adult learners struggle mentally with returning to postsecondary education or engaging in that space for the first time. Adult learners might lack a sense of belonging due to not seeing themselves in the current

narrative surrounding postsecondary education. This can prevent adult students from pursuing a postsecondary education and persisting with completing their degree.

Flexibility

Many adult learners are also adult *workers*, and thus, face serious time constraints when it comes to re-engaging or engaging in postsecondary education. Being flexible when it comes to the mode of instruction (remote, hybrid, or in-person) and to the time of courses is imperative to the success of adult learners.

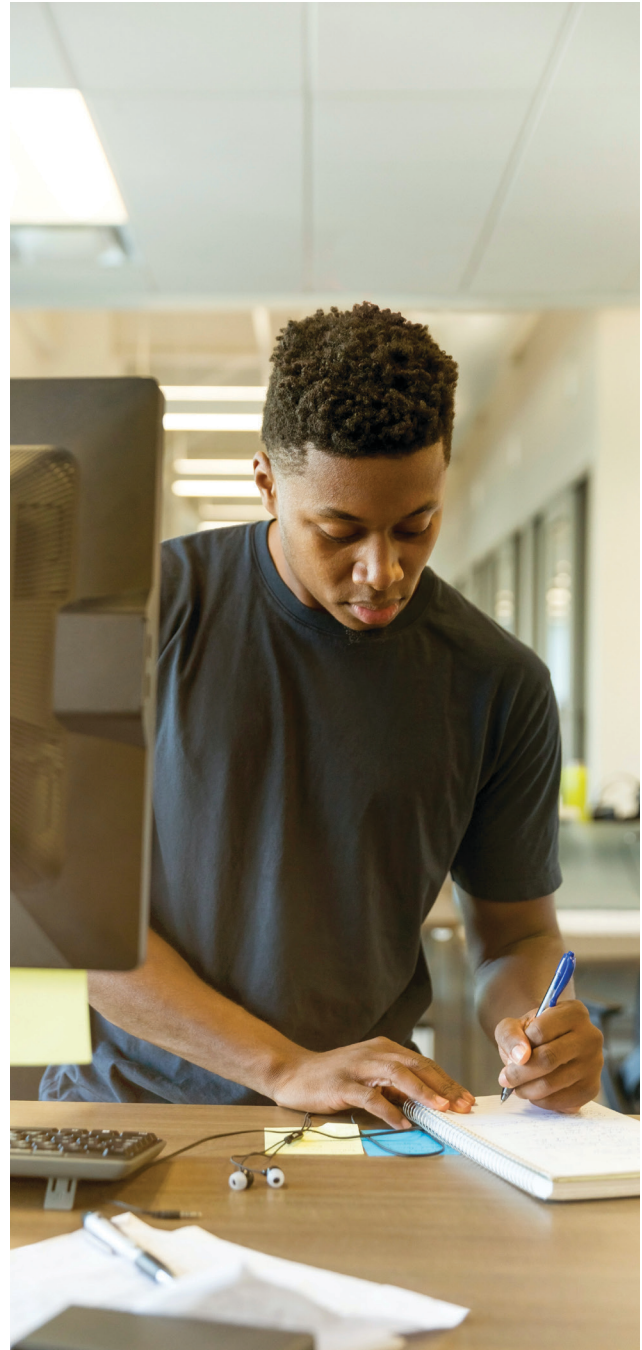
Support and Engagement from Employers

Engaging employers in efforts to reduce barriers to higher education for their employees can be instrumental in enabling adults to pursue postsecondary education. Business leaders should be engaged in conversations with postsecondary leaders to ensure that course and program offerings align with the needs of the business community. One example of this includes the BlueSky Tennessee Institute, in which Blue Cross Blue Shield and East Tennessee State University developed an accelerated curriculum to offer bachelor's degrees in two years.

Financial Barriers to Higher Education for Adult Learners

Seven in ten adult learners report that cost is their biggest barrier to pursuing postsecondary education. For adult learners, the cost goes well beyond the expected cost of tuition, fees, and textbooks. Adult learners can also pay in lost wages from pausing their work to return to school.

Data from United for ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) found that, in 2021, 20 of the most prevalent occupations in Indiana paid less than \$20 an hour. ALICE households live above the poverty level, but still cannot afford the basic cost of living in their county. About 39 percent of the population in Indiana is below the ALICE threshold. Thus, if a sizable portion of the Indiana population cannot afford the basic cost of living, engaging or re-engaging with postsecondary education can be incredibly difficult.



While cost remains the biggest obstacle for adult learners, there are innovative ways to overcome this barrier. Many companies will provide their workers with a tuition assistance to expand their credentials or pursue a specific program. There are also state-wide efforts to provide financial aid to adult learners specifically on top of traditional financial aid mechanisms like federal Pell Grants.

What Indiana is Doing to Alleviate the Financial Burden

- [Indiana Adult Student Grant](#) | The Adult Student Grant is specifically designed to meet the unique needs of working adults starting or completing an associate degree, bachelor's degree or certificate by providing a \$2,000 grant. The grant may be used toward tuition and regularly assessed fees.
- [Next Level Jobs Workforce Ready Grant](#) | This grant covers the tuition and fees for students participating in eligible high-value certificate programs at select institutions of higher education. The grant is available for students for two years and covers the certificate program's course credit requirements. Programs included in the grant are based on employer demand, wages, job placement rates, and program completion rates, including advanced manufacturing, building and construction, health sciences, IT & Business Services, and transportation and logistics.

Best Practices for Removing Barriers and Engaging Adult Learners

Employer Engagement

- [UpSkill America \(The Aspen Institute\)](#) | This initiative from the Aspen Institute assists employers and workforce development organizations in improving their educational and career advancement efforts for employees.
- [Achieve Your Degree Program \(Ivy Tech Community College\)](#) | This initiative is a collaborative effort between Ivy Tech Community College and nearly 300 Indiana employers. If a student's employer is part of this partnership, they can earn an associate degree or credential in a discipline approved by their employer for minimal or no up-front cost.

Engagement/ Re-engagement

- [NC Reconnect](#) | Their goal is to connect and inform as many adults as possible about the variety of fast, flexible, and affordable education and job training

programs that North Carolina's 58 Community Colleges have to offer.

- [University of Southern Indiana](#) | The Center for Adult Learner Success exists to serve as an advocate for adult learners interested in pursuing higher education with the University of Southern Indiana. The Center collaborates with academic colleges, Outreach and Engagement, and campus support services to act as a primary University contact point for potential and current adult students.
- [49er Finish Program](#) | Recruits former UNC Charlotte students to return to school and then supports them as they complete their academic goals. A principal component of the program is personalized academic advising throughout.

Affordability

- [Tennessee Reconnect Grant](#) | The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is a last-dollar grant that pays the remaining balance of tuition and mandatory fees after other state and federal financial aid have been applied for adults pursuing an associate degree, technical degree, or technical diploma.
- [Michigan Reconnect](#) | This is a last-dollar scholarship program that pays for students over 25 to attend their in-district community college tuition-free or offers a large tuition discount if they attend an out-of-district community college.

Wraparound Services

- [Mississippi's Complete 2 Complete](#) | Designed for adults that never finished their degree, C2C provides resources like a support coach, financial aid, and career pathway assistance to adults seeking to finish their education at every Mississippi community college.
- [Adult Promise](#) | Over 2 years, the Lumina Foundation provides multi-year grants to 15 states to increase the success of adult students. The Adult Promise evaluation tracked progress by focusing on six important issues: state and institutional policy, outreach and recruitment, support for adult students, financial assistance, equity considerations, and crisis response. Indiana's initial

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You Can. Go Back campaign, as well as the Adult Student Grant were developed under this initiative.

- [Colorado State University Global's Stackable Credits](#) | CSU Global designed its online certificates, specializations, and degrees to work as building blocks for students, and these stackable credentials are also entirely online, which brings added convenience and flexibility for adult learners. With these programs, students can gain expertise in their current discipline or field while also working toward longer-term career goals. Students work with an enrollment counselor, advisor, and industry career coach to create an education plan that meets both their needs and those of their potential employer.





Established in 2001, **The Hunt Institute** honors the legacy of James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

Learn more at www.hunt-institute.org.



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