

June 13, 2017

**FINAL REPORT OF THE ACTION TEAM FOR INCREASING
ADULT COMPLETIONS ALIGNED WITH ECONOMIC NEEDS**

Submitted for: Information.

Summary: The report updates the Board on the Non-Traditional Learner Board Action Team.

Action Requested: None.

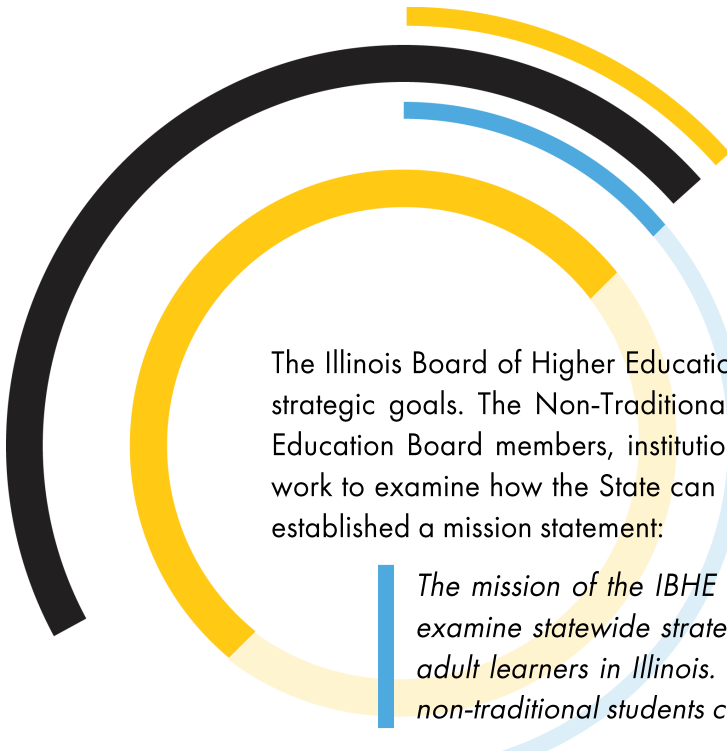
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Adult Learners in Illinois: A Policy Brief and Recommendations



A Report and Update from
the Illinois Board of Higher Education Academic Affairs Staff
to the Non-Traditional Learner Action Team



The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) established Board Action Teams in 2014 to address strategic goals. The Non-Traditional Learner Action Team, made up of Illinois Board of Higher Education Board members, institutional representatives, and experienced practitioners, began its work to examine how the State can best address the needs of adult students. The Action Team first established a mission statement:

The mission of the IBHE Non-Traditional Learner Action Team is to identify and examine statewide strategies to increase degree attainment for non-traditional/adult learners in Illinois. These strategies will focus on increasing the number of non-traditional students contributing to the Illinois goal of 60 x 2025.

The team also adopted the definition of a non-traditional learner from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). According to the NCES, members of this population are characterized by one or more of the following characteristics:

- Has delayed enrollment into postsecondary education;
- Attends part-time;
- Is financially independent of their parents;
- Works full-time while enrolled;
- Has dependents other than a spouse;
- Are single parents; and
- Lacks a standard high school diploma.

The action team's acknowledgment that the non-traditional learner population is not uniform shaped the following report and recommendations.¹ The need to segment the market in order to tailor focused efforts to incentivize enrollment and completion provides a basis for possible targeted efforts. The action team compiled interim adult completion targets for reaching the Illinois 60 x 2025 goal and metrics to gauge success. After a year of work, the team was ready to compile its findings and make some over-arching recommendations focused around increasing the college completion rates of Illinois non-traditional learners. However, the ongoing crisis around the State's budget has resulted in the refocusing of the work. Some steps to increase adult enrollment and completion can be taken even in this period of great uncertainty about the future of Illinois public higher education, while other steps will have to wait for stability to have returned to the system after the current impasse has been resolved and may require additional resources.

¹ Portions of this Action team report were drawn from the Finish Up Illinois final report. This project was funded by a planning grant and the final report was authored by Heather McCambly, Debra Bragg, Brian Durham, and Daniel Cullen. It represents collaborative work between the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, IBHE, and the Illinois Community College Board.



Illinois Data Picture for Non-Traditional Learners

In 2016, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)² released a report entitled “Completing College: A State-Level View of Student Attainment Rates.”³ Notable findings were focused on adult learners in Illinois (defined in the data as students who initially enroll in college at age 24 or older). These findings include:

- Illinois has the **highest completion rate** for students starting at public universities part time – more than 2x the national average.;
- Illinois has the highest completion rate for **adult learners** (students older than 24) at public universities – **50% higher** than the national average;
- Illinois is 4th in the nation in **completion** for full time community college students – 13 percentage points higher than the national average; and
- Illinois is 8th in the nation in terms of completion for adult learners at community colleges – **15% higher** than the national average.

The National Student Clearinghouse data provides a picture of the entire higher education ecosystem in Illinois, rather than focusing on individual institution completion rates. An NSC 2015 report on student mobility found that “a third of all first time students (37.2 percent) transferred to or enrolled in a different institution at least once within six years before receiving a bachelor’s degree” and “of those who transferred, almost half changed their institution more than once. The transfer rate of the cohort, combined with the frequency of transfers, depict a complex picture of movement through multiple institutions while students pursue their academic goals.”⁴ This complex picture is best painted by data which takes a systemic approach to examining student completions and takes into account transfer “swirl” so prevalent in higher education, particularly for non-traditional students.


The NSC data indicates that once non-traditional learners enter Illinois institutions, they are extremely well-served. But the *IBHE Public Agenda: 5 Years Later report*, a strategic plan midpoint analysis completed by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), found that although enrollments of adults have increased, the growth rates are below most states.⁵ Also, the 2016 Stronger Nation report from the Lumina Foundation indicates that nearly a million and a half Illinois residents (or 21.5%) have some college and no degree and

² The Clearinghouse is the largest education electronic data exchange service provider, performing more than one billion exchanges annually with its over 3,600 participating institutions.

³ Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P., Yuan, X., Nathan, A & Hwang, Y. , A. (2016, February). Completing College: A State-Level View of Student Attainment Rates (Signature Report No. 10a). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

⁴ Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P.K, Yuan, X., & Harrell, A. (2015, July). Transfer and Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2008 Cohort (Signature Report No. 9). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

⁵ [IBHE Public Agenda: 5 Years Later](#).



over one and a half million residents (or 24.6%) hold only a high school credential.⁶ So, while Illinois is leading in serving adult student populations after they enroll, there are still opportunities to strengthen the pathway to obtaining a degree or credential and to increase the number of students enrolling in postsecondary institutions.

Although long-standing groups like Illinois Transfer Coordinators have been extremely effective in making innovations like the Illinois Articulation Agreement a national model, in the context of meeting its statewide college completion goals, Illinois could improve coordination across institutions specifically to capture students who have left college or transferred institutions with enough credits to earn a credential without receiving that credential *or* to reengage students who are very close to the “completion” finish line. This problem is an issue of social justice for the student and of lost human capital in the workforce as both students and employers are left in these situations without a marker for the valuable skills earned through the experiences accumulated across one or more postsecondary institutions.⁷ Creating better systems to recognize students’ accomplishments is also an opportunity to leverage Illinois’ substantial investment in career pathways to reduce stigma for adults with some college and no degree, as well as to strengthen a “stackable” mindset to educational attainment and emphasizing the associate’s degree as a value-added step in student pathways.

From a national perspective, more than 31 million students have left higher education in the last 20 years with some credits but no degree or certificate, with perhaps 1.2 million of these individuals having earned more than 60 credits.⁸ This raises concerns not only about lost human capital, but also the ratio of student indebtedness to actual wage gains. In recent years, several key state-level reports have noted the opportunity and need in areas related to these student populations in Illinois. For example, in 2014 NCHEMS reported⁹ a number of strengths and weaknesses in Illinois that emphasize the need to boost the attention given to underserved and often swirling student populations. Such systems should be designed to recognize student achievements and reengage them as needed across nontraditional attendance patterns. This need echoes the earlier recommendations in *The Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success* to focus efforts to reengage adults and all students with some credit and no degree, to align pathways to improve degree outcomes, to increase efficiencies to award degrees and boost associate’s degree completion.

⁶ [A Stronger Nation 2016, Lumina Foundation.](#)

⁷ Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Harrell, A., Wild, J., & Ziskin, M. (2014). *Some college, no degree: A national view of students with some college enrollment, but no completion* (Signature Report No. 7). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearing-house Research Center. Retrieved from <http://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport7/>

⁸ Shapiro et al., 2014

⁹ A summary of the report is available online at http://www.ibhe.org/Board/agendas/2014/April/NCHEMS_Report_KeyFindings.pdf



Highlights from the NCHEMS report:

- At the postsecondary level, Illinois is losing ground with the greatest loss being among adults with an AA degree;
- At the high school diploma level, Illinois is closing the gap between whites and minorities, but at a rate lower than the US. At the postsecondary level the gap continues to widen. Illinois is losing ground;
- Illinois has improved at every step of the educational pipeline, but remains far behind best performing states at each step;
- Participation rates for low income students have improved in all states. The gain in Illinois is less than the U.S. average;
- Enrollments of adults have increased but at rates well below most states and the US average; and
- Earnings of college graduates have increased at rates greater than the US average. The exception is the wage rates of AA holders.

Although many educational leaders write and speak about the so-called changing attendance patterns of today's students, national data reminds us that even two decades ago, half of all bachelor's degree recipients had attended more than one postsecondary institution.¹⁰ In other words, attendance patterns are not in the process of changing, they have already changed,¹¹ but the way institutions and systems make transfer policy and account for, assess, and credential students has not kept pace.¹² Moreover, the way institutions themselves are assessed and receive credit for educational impact has been equally slow to adapt.¹³ A loose patchwork has developed around the assumed portability of credits, but a great deal can fall through the cracks as a result of weak connections in shared understanding of student progress, learning, or equivalency; shaky transfer experiences; and an often bulky infrastructure that leaves many students and even educators unsure about their options.¹⁴ These post-traditional attendance patterns are also more common among economically disadvantaged students and may in themselves have a negative pull on likelihood to complete college.¹⁵

¹⁰ McCormick, A. C. (2003). Swirling and double-dipping: New patterns of student attendance and their implications for higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2003(121), 13–24. <http://doi.org/10.1002/he.98>

¹¹ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2006). Following their every move: An investigation of social-class differences in college pathways. *Soci-ology of Education*, 79(1), 61–79.

¹² Anderson, L. (2015a). *Reverse transfer: Paving the pathway*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/20/70/12070.pdf>; Bahr, P. R. (2009). College hopping: Exploring the occurrence, frequency, and consequences of lateral transfer. *Community College Review*, 36(4), 271–298; Sturtz, A. J. (2006). The multiple dimensions of student swirl. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 13(2), 151–158; Wang, Y., & Pilarzyk, T. (2009). Understanding student swirl: The role of environmental factors and retention efforts in the later academic success of suspended students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 11(2), 211–226.

¹³ Sturtz, A. J. (2006). The multiple dimensions of student swirl. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 13(2), 151–158.

¹⁴ McCormick, A. C. (2003). Swirling and double-dipping: New patterns of student attendance and their implications for higher education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2003(121), 13–24. <http://doi.org/10.1002/he.98>

¹⁵ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2006). Following their every move: An investigation of social-class differences in college pathways. *Soci-ology of Education*, 79(1), 61–79.



Current Higher Education Data Limitations for Non-Traditional Students

The US Department of Education currently reports on student graduation and retention rates at colleges and universities. These data points, calculated by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), are based on cohorts of first-time, full-time freshmen. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is planning for critical improvements to its completion data that will allow for disaggregation for student subset: first-time, part-time students; non-first-time, full-time students; and non-first-time, part-time students. These data will provide institutions and state policymakers more contextual information to assist with planning for, and assessing, initiatives or programs focused on non-traditional learner success. Reporting on these data elements was set to begin in 2016.

The Illinois Higher Education information System (IHEIS), the IBHE's portion of the Illinois Longitudinal Data System (ILDS), is also poised to provide more nuanced data around retention and progression rates for students in a way that is inclusive of non-traditional populations. This data collection will also allow the examination of success rates for students who are eligible for state and federal need-based aid programs. Currently, the data elements collected and assessed at the state level mirror the national data collection model which counts graduation and retention rates for first-time, full-time freshmen students.

Ongoing Illinois Initiatives that Affect Non-Traditional Learners

Credit for Prior Learning/Prior Learning Assessment

Illinois is engaged in significant work around prior learning assessment (PLA) including the development of a single institutional portal for portfolio assessment that will allow community colleges in Illinois to offer PLA credit to students. A partnership between the CAEL and Harper College would have Harper serving as the centralized hub, relying on CAEL's LearningCounts™ to both teach portfolio development courses and manage the portfolio assessment process for Illinois students. All Illinois community colleges will be eligible to participate in the system, within the terms of their institutional PLA policies. Faculty assessors from the participating community colleges will provide the primary pool of assessors for the project, supplemented as needed by the CAEL assessor network. Webinar-based training will be provided by CAEL to prepare advisors and other staff to support the project.



Illinois Articulation Initiative

The Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) is a statewide transfer agreement on courses transferable among more than 100 participating colleges or universities in Illinois as well as a general education core that transfers as a package to upwards of 100 private and public colleges and universities. IAI works best for students who know they are going to transfer, but who are undecided on the college or university that will grant their baccalaureate degree. All colleges and universities participating in the IAI agree to accept a “package” of IAI general education courses in lieu of their own comparable lower-division general education requirements. IAI also includes major recommendations for the first two years of college in several popular majors. Faculty panels, which have expertise in the major field of study, created these recommendations. IAI major recommendations work best for students who have chosen their majors and are going to eventually transfer, but who are undecided on the college or university that will grant their baccalaureate degree. The IAI has created a “backdoor” common course numbering system which eases course equivalency discussions.


Illinois Longitudinal Data System (ILDS)

The ILDS, when fully deployed, will provide data to help to track the outcomes of Illinois students as they progress from Pre-K through Postsecondary education, and as they enter the workforce. Longitudinal data supports an in-depth, comprehensive view of students’ progress and will ultimately help guide policymakers on where to invest time and energy to most effectively improve student achievement in our State. The ILDS is defined by Public Act 96-0107 and enabled through federal funding, and instructs the State Board of Education to link student test scores, length of enrollment, and graduation records over time.¹⁶ The system also will connect students to career planning and resources, with the potential to facilitate the application process for financial aid and records for transfer students. This initiative illustrates major investment in intra-agency infrastructure and interagency cooperation with an expectation that the Master Client Index will enable the data integration of disparate state data systems.

Math/Developmental Education Reform

Developmental education reform, which is happening at both the state level and at individual institutions, can help solve the problem of students missing one or two critical but difficult/barrier course(s). (Many examples can be provided, especially as the Illinois Community College Board leads an effort with the IBHE, colleges, universities and other stakeholders to reform developmental education. One illustrating example is that Northeastern Illinois University recently began offering stretch courses in math and English that can be useful as students who have been out of the educational system return with rusty skills.) Math pathways and developmental

¹⁶ For more information on the current state of the ILDS, see: <http://www.ibhe.state.il.us/ILDS/materials/ILDSReport052815.pdf>



education reform will likely be a key strategy necessary to successfully reengaging students with some college but no degree.

STEM Guided Pathways Project

Illinois was selected to participate in Complete College America's (CCA) Guided Pathways to Success (GPS) in STEM Careers Initiative supported by the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust. The technical assistance grant gave Illinois access to national experts in establishing innovative course scheduling, improved academic advising, and career counseling and guidance toward degree completions for STEM programs being offered by Illinois community colleges and universities.


Illinois Community College's Workforce Strategic Plan

As the largest provider of public workforce training in the state, the system of 48 community colleges ensures that all Illinois residents have educational and training opportunities leading to high wage and high growth employment. Responding to the needs of the community is a core mission of the Illinois Community College System. A five-year Workforce Education Strategic Plan was developed by a partnership between the Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois Council of Community College Presidents, with engagement from representatives of various stakeholders, such as other Illinois State entities and interested parties. The overall intent of a community college system-wide strategic plan is to continue to be a leader in the field of workforce training and education. Additionally, the system intends to use the plan to strengthen and build upon the existing foundation for future workforce initiatives in the state. These efforts will expand and enhance Illinois' ability to attract businesses and develop educational opportunities to support students' success as they prepare to enter the workforce.

Higher Education Commission on the Future of the Workforce

The IBHE convened Illinois state educational and economic development agencies to assemble the staff, expertise, data, and research needed to assist the Commission as it examines and develops data, effective practices, and policy recommendations to increase postsecondary education attainment and address regional workforce needs. The Commission, in four focused meetings, examined existing efforts to improve the link between educational programming and regional workforce needs, including:

- The ongoing development of a state plan to implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA);
- The Illinois Community College Board's Education/Workforce strategic planning process; and
- The effort of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to assess the extent that current educational offerings address the range, type, and scope of skills needed by targeted employers.



IBHE also reached out to interested groups and stakeholders to expand data, research, effective policies and practices, and additional resources available to assist the Commission in its deliberations and recommendations. After review and discussion of the relevant information, the Commission developed statewide recommendations to increase alignment and innovation between higher education and workforce needs.

Assessing “High-Quality” Credentials

The Lumina Foundation’s [Stronger Nation 2016 report](#) established a national sample of certificate holders and pinpoints the certificates that provided a 20% wage premium over the typical high school graduate. For the first time, Lumina had the information it needed to widen its definition of ‘high quality’ postsecondary attainment to include some certificates. The report also provided a conservative baseline estimate on such certificate attainment in each state. While this baseline information was included in the overall completion rates and is extremely useful, Lumina is encouraging states to examine their own certificate/credential ecosystem and to develop their own definition of what is “meaningful and high quality.” IBHE has reached out to national experts at the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce and has begun to craft a draft certificate/credential assessment framework for Illinois based on some national best practices and specific Illinois priorities. Of course, this planning cannot happen in isolation, as the 60x2025 goal belongs to the State of Illinois. Therefore, IBHE is convening a few focused meetings of partner state agencies to review, edit, contribute to, and finalize a state framework to assess credentials and certificates. This effort should provide a mechanism to recognize the credentialing that happens outside of the traditional post-secondary degree structure and to apply consistent and meaningful standards across educational sectors. A report on the efforts of this cross-agency group should be released in the summer of 2017. The findings will take into account the non-traditional students served by the Private, Business and Vocational Schools (PBVS) sector institutions and short-term certificate programs at traditional institutions throughout Illinois.



Ongoing Action Team Draft Guiding Recommendations

IBHE should:

- Encourage regional collaboratives to focus initiatives on returning adult students;
- Prioritize data collection and analysis of credentialing in Illinois. Credentials offered by degree-granting institutions, the PBVS sector, and third party/industry partners should be assessed and integrated into postsecondary completion conversations;
- Work with partner agencies and institutions to scale up the developmental math co-requisite model, which has excellent results, in order to address the issue of math as a barrier for adults returning and completing credentials;
- Seek funding to support and incentivize the implementation of Guided Pathways to Success strategies;
- Coordinate with state agency partners and other stakeholder groups to develop and incentivize initiatives focused on non-traditional student populations; and
- Focus on providing actionable data and research on adult student populations to inform planning at the state policy and institutional levels.

