

Education Issue Brief

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Why Equity Matters for Adult College Completion



In recent years, a broad movement has coalesced around the need to increase educational attainment in the United States, driven in large part by concerns about the nation's economic viability and the American people's economic stability and mobility. A wide variety of education, workforce, and policy stakeholders have come together under what is often called the "college completion agenda" to articulate specific goals for the number and type of postsecondary credentials required to address workforce needs nationwide and to improve people's ability to thrive in a changing economy. As momentum has gathered around this agenda, two important issues have come to the fore. First, adult learners will play an important role in meeting completion goals because of both their large numbers and the value of their earlier education and work experience. There are nearly 170 million U.S. residents between the ages of 25 and 64, fewer than half of whom have obtained a postsecondary degree or certificate; about 15 percent of these adults have some college but no credential.^{1,2} Second, it is critical that we pay close attention to issues of equity in efforts to increase educational attainment; if not, we risk deepening past injustices and increasing economic marginalization of people and communities of color that have been historically underserved by higher education and the economy. Indeed, while about 46 percent of white adults hold a college degree, the figures range from about 22 percent for Native Americans and 24 percent for Latino adults, to about 30 percent for Blacks.³

An explicit focus on equity issues may be especially important for programs that target adult learners. Adult learners are more diverse than "traditional" students with respect to age and work and life experience. They are also a more diffuse group than traditional students, who can often be reached directly through their high schools and districts. Moreover, many adult learners have already had unsuccessful experiences with higher education. This may be especially true for Black, Latino, and Native American learners who have historically been less likely to enroll in college or to complete a credential when they do enroll.⁴

Adult learners of color represent an important and untapped asset in efforts to build the nation's skills and increase attainment.

Programs seeking to better serve adult learners need to approach the work with intentionality about systemic issues that have often discouraged adults from completion and have left some racial and ethnic groups underrepresented in and underserved by higher education.

At the same time, adult learners of color represent an important and untapped asset in efforts to build the nation’s skills and increase attainment.

In this brief, we draw on data collected by Mathematica through a series of telephone interviews and a survey with Adult Promise program leaders in the 12 states participating in the evaluation. We describe how program leaders and their partners are incorporating a racial equity focus into initiatives targeting adult learners through goal setting, outreach and recruitment, financial supports, and completion strategies. We conclude with some overarching reflections for postsecondary education stakeholders seeking to engage in similar efforts.

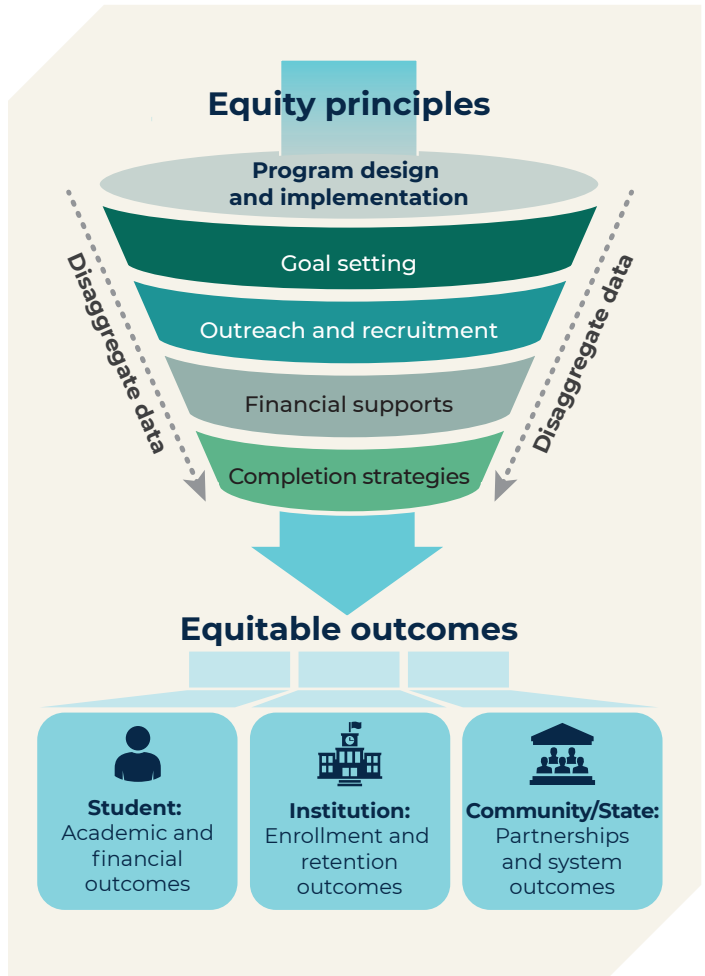
Intentional equity in practice: Lessons from the Adult Promise states

All states participating in the Adult Promise program have made a commitment to equity. Their experiences point to challenges and potential solutions that offer lessons for stakeholders in other states, higher education systems, and individual institutions seeking to improve attainment or completion while reducing gaps between racial and ethnic groups. These challenges arise at every phase of the program, from goal setting, to outreach and engagement of adult learners and people of color, to financial and other supports for participants’ credential completion. As the figure illustrates and this discussion shows, equity principles and analysis of disaggregated data can guide all phases of the work.



In 2017, Lumina Foundation launched the Adult Promise Pilot program with grants to five states (Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Washington) to develop and test innovative programs to engage adult learners in postsecondary education through improved outreach, financial supports, and other supportive services. The “promise” aspect of the programs seeks to improve access to financial supports, as many adult learners have exhausted or are otherwise ineligible for traditional sources of aid. 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, Texas, and Rhode Island). In its role as the Adult Promise evaluation partner, Mathematica is conducting formative and summative studies of the program, focusing on the first two cohorts of grantee states.

Across its work, Lumina Foundation focuses on creating opportunities and increasing attainment for underserved student populations. This focus is highlighted by Lumina’s Commitment to Racial Equity and is embedded in the vision for all three cohorts of Adult Promise grantees, although Lumina’s request for proposals from the second cohort was more explicit in requiring (1) a state financial commitment to adults pursuing education beyond high school and (2) a sharp focus on marginalized communities, including Black, Latino, and Native American adults.



Setting equity goals

Setting goals is a fundamental part of any change effort. But the process can pose challenges in different state, regional, or institutional settings, especially given variations in policies and demographics.

Set clear, measureable, and relevant equity goals.

Some Adult Promise states link attainment and equity goals to state performance funding policies that tie financial resources to institutions' progress toward state goals. However, in some cases, the performance funding framework does not define groups at a level that is sufficiently granular for institutions' or other stakeholders' use in their own settings. For example, one Adult Promise leader reported that the state framework "left a lot of things undefined," making it unclear how to measure progress. "[I]t just said [they] would close the gaps between minority and white students." Goals need to account for a state's specific subpopulations. For example, both Idaho and Maine are fairly homogenous, with large white majorities, but in both these states Black attainment is on par with whites.⁵ Adult Promise leaders in these states report thinking carefully about how to set meaningful goals for specific subpopulations, including Latino and Native Americans, as well as some immigrant groups.

Similarly, several Adult Promise leaders noted that demographic variation across regions or institutions within a state could make overarching equity goals less relevant in some places. To address this challenge, some states are setting specific equity goals for the Adult Promise program or related completion initiatives, which may vary by region or institution. For example, Ohio has set overarching state equity goals while the Adult Promise program articulated goals specific to Black students. At the same time, some regions of the state are almost 100 percent white. Adult Promise leaders encourage stakeholders in such regions to look at their own data to set locally relevant improvement goals. The goals for racially homogeneous regions can then address other areas for improvement, such as gaps by gender and socioeconomic status.

Define target populations carefully to avoid

increasing inequity. Adults with some college but no credential have been the focus on many state and national efforts to increase attainment.⁶ Targeting such "low hanging fruit" makes sense, but stakeholders should be cautious about unintended consequences. For example, in Washington, Adult Promise leaders described a process of defining and narrowing their target population based on factors that included age and length of time since the student last attended college. Concerned about equity implications, the leaders used different cut-off points to compare the population in order to ensure that they did not narrow it so much as to exclude adult learners of color—something they reported having seen in other states. In addition to undertaking a close examination of the data, Washington adopted "equity principles" based on an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, thus ensuring attention to equity "at every stage of the initiative," from defining the target population to recruiting and serving them.

An approach focused on goal setting and related decision making that draws on carefully disaggregated data and the adoption of equity principles can also help mitigate against a potentially misguided assumption that Adult Promise or similar efforts will inherently address educational inequities simply because the adult or low-income student population in a state or at participating institutions includes a large number or proportion of people of color. Such an assumption risks confusing equality—that is, enrolling and serving people of color in the same way as whites—with equity—that is, understanding and addressing factors that persistently and systematically hold back people of color vis-à-vis their white counterparts.

Building equity into outreach and recruitment

A large body of research suggests that exclusionary organizational processes often undermine access to higher education. Complex application, matriculation, financial aid, and other procedures make it difficult for people and communities

Disaggregate the data to set goals, target outreach, and understand needs

An examination of disaggregated data is a critical cross-cutting strategy, which can help ensure that equity is served throughout the design and implementation of programs targeting adult learners.



Setting goals. Examples from several states, including Ohio and Washington, underscore the importance of looking at fine-grained

subpopulations, including those at the intersection of factors such as race or ethnicity, age, income, and earlier college experience. Ultimately, it is important to define target populations and set specific attainment goals that make sense in context while avoiding exacerbation of current inequities.



Targeting outreach. States can leverage existing data to develop a better understanding of their target population and guide outreach and recruitment strategies.

For example, Washington and Oregon use state education, employment, and other data as well as data from the National Student Clearinghouse to understand more fully who their potential students are, where they live and work, what they earn, and how many college credits they have completed. They use these data both to encourage adult learners and people of color to access tools to identify and navigate different postsecondary pathways and to support tailored outreach by institutions that have demonstrated that they are “adult-ready” and “adult-friendly.”



Understanding and addressing specific needs.

Many states analyze disaggregated administrative data to shape nuanced supports for groups with the greatest attainment gaps. For example, although all three groups are often considered under a single demographic category of Asian and Pacific Islander students, Minnesota’s data show that Chinese students have higher average achievement than Laotian and Hmong students. California takes a regional approach to data disaggregation, highlighting, for example, that students in the rural Inland Empire face particular challenges as compared to students in other areas, even when their race is the same. Recognition of these disparities within their broader target populations helps to dispel myths—for example, about diverse Asian populations being uniformly high-achieving—and provides a more complete and nuanced picture of students’ lived experiences. At the same time, it allows state leaders to direct academic and social supports to the particular subgroups most in need of them.

without the needed experience and resources to navigate these processes successfully.^{7,8} It follows that students of color enroll in postsecondary education at lower rates than their white counterparts.⁹ Adult Promise programs address such barriers by engaging and listening to students and other stakeholders and developing tailored outreach and recruitment strategies that represent and resonate with adult learners and communities of color.

Engage adult learners and people of color to understand their perspectives.

Through activities such as focus groups and listening sessions, Adult Promise states engage adult learners, people of color, and other stakeholders in the development of recruitment strategies. For example, Oregon relies on focus groups to understand barriers to enrollment—whether institutional, financial, familial, or cultural—and develop a marketing toolkit for use across the state. Similarly, California tests messages for adult learners of color, including current and potential enrollees, to determine the types of messages that best capture the interest and attention of intended audiences. Oklahoma uses meetings and events as an opportunity to learn more about adult learners of color. For example, a recent conference for Adult Promise navigators included a session in which a panel of students from diverse backgrounds provided feedback on the navigators’ work.

Tailor materials. Several states tailor their promotional approaches to focus on adult students of color. Rather than draw from stock footage, Kentucky uses images of actual students to reflect the population of its campuses. Similarly, Oklahoma ensures that individuals appearing in the state’s marketing materials mirror the recruited communities. In addition to making certain that marketing images reflect their target populations, Maine customizes their messaging and delivery with the use of marketing “personas.” They developed the personas based on the results of survey research, which identified the typical demographics of adult learners. Using these data, the state developed a range of personas to resonate with adult learners.

It is important, however, to note that, even though a tailored approach may be effective, one state leader cautioned that it can go too far, verging on tokenism, which could be insulting and counterproductive.

Although a tailored approach may be effective, it can go too far, verging on tokenism, which could be insulting.

Building equity into financial supports

A cornerstone of Adult Promise programs is to ensure the availability of adequate financial aid both to encourage postsecondary enrollment and increase retention and completion. Compared with traditional-age students, adult students may face unique financial challenges. They may not qualify for certain types of aid or may require different types of financial supports, such as childcare assistance or debt forgiveness associated with earlier postsecondary experiences. Although most financial supports are based on income criteria without reference to race or ethnicity, Adult Promise leaders view these supports as important to addressing equity issues because data show that the full cost of college attendance takes up a larger proportion of household income for students of color than for their white peers.²⁰ To ensure that financial challenges do not prevent adult learners of color from completing a credential, Adult Promise leaders are identifying and proactively addressing barriers, targeting funding, and rethinking financial aid policies in their states.

Recognize and proactively address financial barriers.

Across the states, Adult Promise leaders note cultural and historical influences that can make students of color reluctant to apply for or accept financial aid or related benefits. For example, in Idaho, leaders observed that Native American students were hesitant to accept aid from a state or federal government that they historically viewed with mistrust. Similarly, the same leaders highlighted

reluctance among some Latino communities, in particular, to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) out of fear for themselves and their families should they go “on record.” As a possible solution to such financial barriers, some institutions in North Carolina are considering incentives such as a free first class to get these learners in the door, after which institutional staff can work with them to identify appropriate financial supports. Hawaii piloted just such a program with some success, offering a free class to adults who had stopped out and had loans.

Aid to cover tuition and fees is important, but addressing adult learners’ financial needs requires other types of supports. For example, several states require students to pay any institutional debts before re-enrolling, and Adult Promise leaders report that even small amounts of debt can pose an important barrier to re-engagement. Hawaii and Minnesota are both working to change that policy so that students may re-enroll despite existing financial obligations. Similarly, Kentucky, Maine and Minnesota plan to use state funds to help students with debt forgiveness. In a different approach, Washington is piloting micro-grants to cover small-dollar needs, including not only former fees but also transcript and application fees. It is worth noting that the amount of funds does not have to be large to be helpful; micro-grants are typically less than \$500.

Emergency aid to cover basic needs is another area of emphasis among Adult Promise programs. Such aid can be especially important for students of color, who experience food and housing insecurity at higher rates than their white peers.²¹ For example, Maine and Minnesota provide or connect students to emergency funding for transportation, heating, food, and health care. Typically available through foundations or private programs, such emergency aid offers flexible and timely help that permits students to remain in school. However, as Maine leaders noted, such aid can require considerable coordination, including coordination with bureaucratic institutions that may not be equipped to accommodate flexible funding.

Nonetheless, emergency resources do not address the more substantial costs associated with childcare and housing that many adult learners must bear. To address these costs, California enacted legislation that provides more financial aid to students with dependents. Minnesota has a grant to cover child care costs for enrolled students, focused on students who are not eligible for other forms of childcare assistance. Several Adult Promise states work to link students to public benefits—such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), income supports, and housing vouchers. For example, in Hawaii, the SNAP Employment and Training Program allows students to receive nutrition benefits and also provides funding for education, transportation, and childcare. In Washington, benefits hubs connect students to a range of financial supports on the campuses of participating community colleges. Many students may be eligible for such benefits but may not be aware that they qualify.

Connect adult learners to targeted funding. In a few Adult Promise states, financial aid options target underrepresented and underserved groups. Given sensitivity and, in some cases, restrictions on racial considerations in college admissions and financial aid awards, foundations or other private partners with a special interest in supporting certain communities typically provide these targeted supports. For example, in Oklahoma, tribal scholarships are available to Native American students and the nonprofit ORO Development Corporation offers funding for education and training of migrant and seasonal farmworkers. In Indiana, some “boutique” scholarships target underrepresented groups, such as minority teacher awards. In Minnesota, loan forgiveness plans also target underrepresented groups, and the Minnesota Indian Scholarship and the Minnesota GI Bill target Native Americans and veterans, respectively. Other targeted resources are available across the states, but the challenge lies in ensuring that adult learners are aware of and get access to them. To that end, Oklahoma, Minnesota, and Maine use navigators to connect students to targeted funding.

Navigators are state or institutional staff who help students transition into and through college, sometimes offering case management and wraparound supports.

Rethink other barriers to aid that have an outsized impact on adult students of color.

Several Adult Promise states are revamping institutional or state policies to ensure improved equity in financial aid and to meet the needs of adult students of color. For example, North Carolina repealed a state university policy that levied a tuition surcharge on students with more than 140 credit hours, which, according to state leaders, was especially adversely affecting adult students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) more than students attending other institutions. In addition to providing financial relief for some students, this effort in helped create new champions for adult learners among the state’s HBCUs.

Building equity into completion strategies

Across the board, Adult Promise leaders recognize that adult learners need specific types of support once they are engaged in postsecondary education. However, understanding and responding to the needs of adult learners who also identify as people of color may require additional attention. Adult Promise states have approached this challenge in several ways, including through staffing and partnerships.

Hire and train staff to engage communities of color.

Adult Promise leaders emphasize the importance of hiring people of color and developing cultural competence in their staff. One common approach is to train staff at the state or institutional level in addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. For example, Ohio offers equity training for select faculty and staff at each pilot institution. Oklahoma encourages institutions to train navigators in how to keep underrepresented students engaged in college.

Another common approach is to hire staff or volunteers with membership in or close associations with communities of color. Adult Promise leaders described such “boots on the ground” as pivotal to connecting with and supporting adult learners from communities of color.

Build and grow credible partnerships in communities of color. Adult Promise leaders view partnerships with individuals and organizations that have established credibility in communities of color as critical to achieving equity goals. Given that the Adult Promise grantees are typically small state-level teams aiming to reach adult learners statewide, local partnerships are essential to providing outreach and support. Partnerships can be even more important for achieving equity goals because some communities of color have historically been excluded—and, in some cases, alienated—from postsecondary education. To address this challenge, several states work through external partners. For example, California works with California Competes (an organization focused on closing equity gaps in higher education); Kentucky partners with institutions that typically enroll large numbers of Black or Latino students; Maine works with refugee organizations; North Carolina partners with historically minority-serving institutions and community colleges, whose adult student populations have an over-representation of communities of color; and Oklahoma partners with Native American–serving institutions and tribal organizations.

The keys to successful partnerships appear to include (1) intentionality, that is, an explicit appreciation for what a partner can bring to efforts to work toward equity, (2) taking time to build authentic relationships with communities, and (3) active listening. With respect to the first strategy, intentionality, Oregon leaders described a process of seeking “honest, critical feedback,” from communities of color, which led them to engage a broader set of organizations, moving beyond the “usual suspects” they had often partnered with.

With respect to the second strategy, the forging of relationships sometimes demands a slow and deliberate process or even the need to stop and reassess the approach. For example, an Oklahoma staff member worked with their own tribe to encourage a college-going culture. The success of that effort led the state to partner with the Tribal Education Departments National Assembly to expand the work to all of the state’s tribal communities, engaging students, families, schools, and other stakeholders from across the education spectrum. Similarly, an Adult Promise leader in Maine noted the state’s troubled history with tribal communities, commenting that trust needed to be proactively built or even repaired. As a result, state leaders have initiated conversations with the state’s four tribes to discuss economic development in tribal areas. Third and finally, active listening is central to successful partnerships. As one Adult Promise leader in Maine put it, “not going in [to a tribal community] and saying, ‘this is how you should interact with us,’ but asking ‘what kind of economic and education access do you feel you need?’” The state takes a similar approach in working with immigrant and refugee groups, with one leader commenting, “We have to listen to what these communities aspire to as well, and stop dictating programming for them [but] have them co-create with us.” Similarly, in Oregon, a respondent noted that feedback from communities of color “is something we’re trying to take to heart and listen [to] in a sustained way.”

The keys to successful partnerships with communities of color include intentionality, taking time to build authentic relationships, and active listening.

Reflections on the experience

A look across the Adult Promise states suggests that a few overarching reflections may be especially relevant for other state, system, or institutional stakeholders seeking to address equity within postsecondary completion initiatives, especially those targeting adults. First, adult learners and people of color are essential to the success of any state's attainment goals. However, higher education has often not served either group particularly well. Therefore, it is important to understand and address proactively the needs and appreciate the assets of adult learners of color. Next, it follows that states, systems, and institutions must develop and implement explicit strategies to reach and support adult learners of color. It is not reasonable to assume that such students will be well served by a policy or program designed to help all students or simply because they attend participating institutions. Careful examination of disaggregated data can be important to avoid such pitfalls. Finally, no state should seek to address these challenges without input from the communities they hope to serve. Listening to, learning from, and partnering with credible individuals and organizations from underserved communities can help states, systems, and institutions better serve these important and often undervalued learners.

Endnotes

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