

Aligning Postsecondary Education with Real Life for Adult Student Success

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OVERVIEW

In 2013, the American Council on Education (ACE) released “Post-traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education: A Manifesto for College Leaders” to highlight the importance of helping post-traditional students succeed in increasing their human capital. The paper defined post-traditional learners as “individuals already in the work force who lack a postsecondary credential yet are determined to pursue further knowledge and skills while balancing work, life, and education responsibilities.” ACE’s 2017 “[The Post-Traditional Learners Manifesto Revisited: Aligning Postsecondary Education with Real Life for Adult Student Success](#)” build’s on their 2013 paper and reveals that a majority of post-traditional learners are enrolled in two-year public institutions (53 percent), while 20 percent of post-traditional learners were enrolled in for-profit institutions, and that post-traditional learners are more likely than other undergraduates to be women, seek career-oriented credentials, and attend less well-resourced, open access institutions. In addition, 44 percent of post-traditional learners were from non-white populations and 70 percent being employed while enrolled, with 45 percent working full-time while enrolled. Nine percent of post-traditional learners also had some type of military connection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Use Better Data for Better Decisions**
 - At the national level, build on ongoing improvements to the Integrated Post-secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) that allow for better understanding the college-going patterns of post-traditional learners.
 - At the state level, leverage Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems to better understand the relationship between post-traditional learners’ learning journeys and outcomes.
- **Better Align Federal Policies with Post-traditional Learner Realities**
 - Continue to invest in the Pell Grant program in ways that make college more affordable for post-traditional learners.
 - Better align federal financial aid and unemployment insurance policies.
 - Tap into new research on the Federal Work Study Program to explore ways to better serve post-traditional learners.
- **Enable Post-traditional Learner Success**
 - Acknowledge learning that occurs outside higher education.
 - Embrace systems and consortia.
 - Use institutional data, policies, and systems to prescribe the right delivery models and services.
 - Create better engagement between higher education and the workforce.

DISCUSSION

Students from diverse backgrounds have benefited from the value offered by a postsecondary education. While colleges and universities have done well in fulfilling their dual promise of access and opportunity, they are currently confronting a series of social, political, economic, and technological pressures that undermine their future ability to do so. By helping post-traditional learners earn a credential or degree, institutions will become more sustainable, and strengthen the nation’s economic vitality. The first step in facilitating post-traditional learner success is creating insights that map who they are and what they need. This insight will help higher education leaders and policymakers work together to deliver them value.