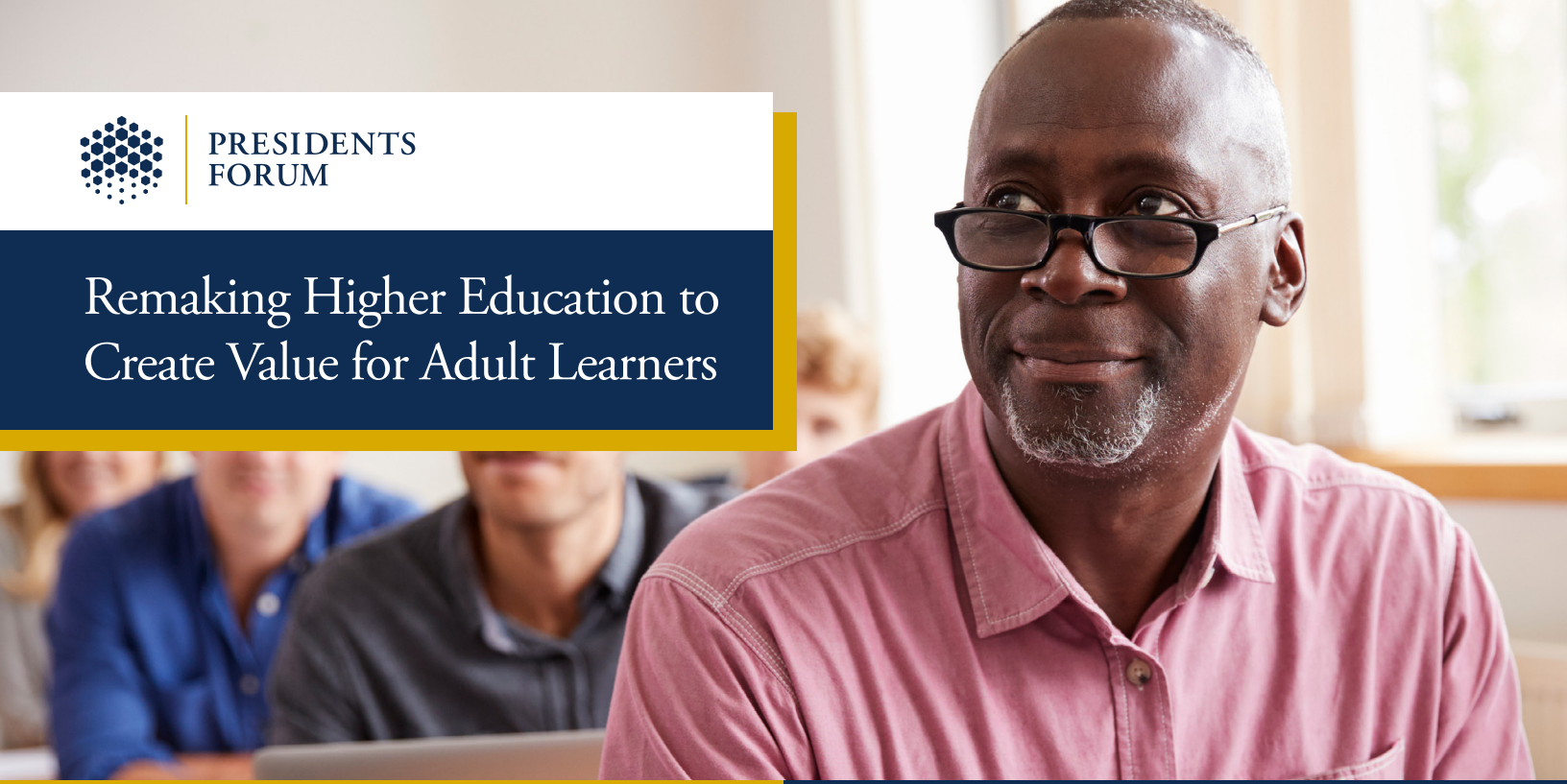




Remaking Higher Education to Create Value for Adult Learners



Learners, especially working adults seeking to level up in the economy, are facing unprecedented disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped our economy and the types of jobs that are available; it has also exacerbated the child care crisis, left millions of Americans dealing with long-term health issues, and put additional pressures and constraints on parents of school-aged children. It is increasingly common for workers to pursue education on and off throughout their lives, as workforce changes prompt them to acquire new skills or they decide to switch careers. Higher education needs to adapt to meet the dynamic needs of adult learners in these changing times and help them achieve economic mobility.

Amid these disruptions for adult learners and resultant enrollment challenges, as well as the expiration of the [\\$76.2 billion](#) in Higher Education Emergency

Relief funds that colleges received at the height of the pandemic, there is also unprecedented pressure on higher education's business model. To meet their mission and ensure financial stability, institutions must find innovative ways to serve a new generation of learners.

In order to do so, higher education must double down on a [learners first](#) approach and design education around learners' needs — recognizing that learners come to college with different experiences, goals, supports and constraints. Compared to traditional-age learners, adult learners are often looking for different outcomes from higher education, and they need coursework delivered in a significantly different way. Higher education needs to ensure that each learning opportunity provides value and economic return for all learners who pursue it.

Since 2020, undergraduate enrollment in higher education [has shrunk](#) by 4.2%, with some of the largest declines coming for learners aged 25 and older. Enrollment for learners aged 25-29 has decreased by 15.3%, and it fell by 6.2% for learners aged 30 and older.



SPOTLIGHT: WHO ARE ADULT LEARNERS?

Though many people still think of 18- to 22-year-olds when they think of college students, today's postsecondary learners don't necessarily resemble that vision.



Nearly two in five (37%) postsecondary learners are aged 25 or older.



Three in four adult learners are working their way through college.



About half of working adult learners are parents.

Although a small number of institutions are specifically designed to serve working adults, by and large, colleges and universities aren't focusing on this demographic of learners. A 2021 survey by The Chronicle of Higher Education and Guild Education of working adult learners and institutional leaders found that just 46% of colleges had supports in place for working adult learners. Similarly, in a 2021 survey by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and StraighterLine of learners aged 20 to 34 who had stopped out of higher education without a degree, 70% said that getting a certificate for the credits they had already earned would have helped them stay enrolled, and about half said that counseling, workshops to address their challenges, and other supports would've helped them stay enrolled.

Postsecondary institutions must understand and recognize adult learners in order to deliver on their educational and moral objectives. Specifically, institutions need to understand not just the demographics of their learners, but also their motivations for pursuing additional education and what they want and need from their education.

“It's important to understand why things are the way they are. What is holding higher education back from reimagining what's possible?”

- Vinice Davis
Venture Partner, Imaginable Futures

“I think some of it is not fully understanding who the student population is. For example, we often think of student parents as teen mothers or teen fathers, but the median age for student parents is 32. So illuminating that data is really helpful in shifting beliefs and then creating effective and personalized interventions.”



CREATING VALUE: WHAT DO ADULT LEARNERS WANT FROM POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

Adult learners are often looking to postsecondary education to help them advance economically.

North Carolina A&T associate professor Geleana Alston adds, “We have all of these assumptions about adult learners, like that all adult learners want to learn online. Well, we have a huge population that is actually taking courses on campus. So we’re really digging through the data to let the evidence support our strategy for moving forward and tapping into a better understanding of the diversity within and ways to support our adult learner population.”

Fortunately, supporting adult learners doesn’t mean neglecting younger ones. For example, traditional-aged learners as well as adult learners can benefit from supports such as employer education benefits, tutoring, and transportation subsidies. In addition, [nearly nine in 10 learners](#) aged 18 to 29 think there is “a mental health crisis” on their campuses, suggesting that increased mental health supports could help both adult and traditional-aged learners. As it turns out, creating support structures with adult learners in mind can make colleges more attractive to and supportive of all learners.



They are looking for education that teaches them the skills they need to succeed in the workforce and has a direct impact on their career prospects. That doesn’t always have to be a degree: Adults with a certificate or certification but no degree have higher employment rates, higher annual incomes, and higher satisfaction with their educational paths than adults without postsecondary credentials.

Adult learners also have to balance their education with work and family obligations, and the traditional model for higher education isn’t working for many of these learners. Cost is an enormous barrier: 70% of working adult learners [consider](#) it their top challenge, yet only about half of institutions offer financial aid specifically for adult learners. There is also a growing disconnect between institutions and learners of all ages, as just 12% of college students [said](#) in a Salesforce survey that they have a strong feeling of belonging on campus, and 40% wanted more support.

As a result of these challenges, 70% of adults aged 18-34 who do not have college degrees — and 49% of same-aged adults with degrees — [agree](#) that college is “a questionable investment.” And two-thirds of all American adults [think](#) that colleges are “stuck in the past” and unable to provide what today’s students need.

Institutions must reorient higher education around what we know works to create value for adult learners and for all students. This paper will explore strategies for how higher education can make itself more relevant and valuable to adult learners, from offering credentials that are in high demand in the workforce to creating pathways that put learners first.

Despite widespread skepticism about the value of college, the degree remains entrenched as [a vehicle for economic mobility](#). But for many adult learners, achieving value starts with shorter, workforce-aligned programs that can stack toward a degree but also provide a more immediate payoff.

UPCEA’s Jim Fong defines [alternative credentials](#) as any credentials that aren’t college degrees, including badges, certificates and licenses. They can replace, augment or serve as on-ramps to degrees or provide off-ramps to employment, depending on the learner’s goals.



REDESIGNING VALUE FOR ADULTS BY STACKING WORKFORCE-RELEVANT CREDENTIALS

College graduates continue to command significantly higher earnings than people with only a high school diploma.

“Alternative credentials are a win-win situation,” Fong says. “There are a lot of degrees in higher education, but people are stalled along the way to completing them. Alternative credentials allow them to re-engage with higher education. Maybe their long-term dream is that degree, but in the meantime, they can earn a certificate, a badge, or a microcredential and play a major role in our fast-moving economy.”

Alternative credentials can be transformative for learners who aren’t able to access traditional degree programs or who want to get a return on their investment more quickly, according to Rio Salado College president Kate Smith. Not all credentials have the same [return on investment](#), but about half of certificate programs enable their graduates to recoup their investment within five years, particularly in fields such as transportation, nursing, allied health, and metalworking.

Many alternative credentials also have a theoretical advantage over degrees in that their shorter length allows them to respond more quickly to changing workforce needs by evolving their curricula. At the same time, their length requires the issuers of those credentials to be purposeful in program design, so that the credentials deliver meaningful content in a condensed time frame.

“As we’re thinking about the way that higher education looks — our academic programs, our training programs, the breadth of opportunities in higher education — we also need to think about how we’re preparing learners for a changing world,” says Karen Bussey, the deputy chief of staff at Fayetteville State University and a former policy advisor to New Jersey’s Office of the Secretary of Higher Education. “Employers are specifically calling out new skills that they’re looking for, and adults need to gain those skills in order to compete.”

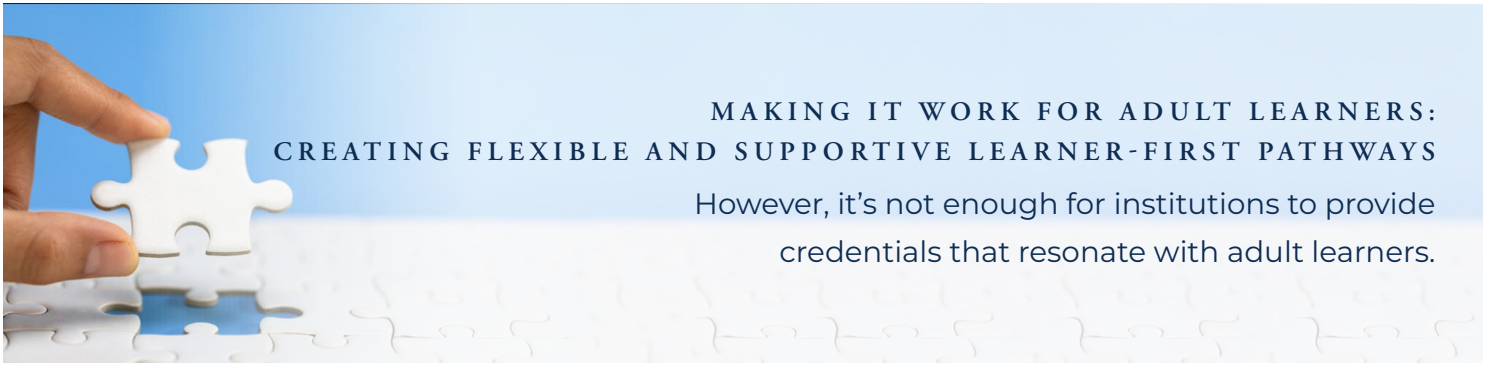
“Alternative credentialing and microcredentialing make education truly accessible. They make social mobility pathways a reality, and they are such a perfect fit within the [learners first framework](#).”

– Kate Smith
President, Rio Salado College

Higher education needs to design credentials that have built-in mechanisms for workers to pause their education, reap the value of what they’ve learned in the workforce, and return to higher education if and when they need it to advance their goals. Institutions should partner with industry experts and businesses to ensure that their programs evolve with workforce needs and remain relevant for adult learners looking to advance in their careers.

Institutions must also make them accessible to and achievable for adult learners by designing pathways around these credentials that meet learners’ needs. That is especially important to re-engage the [39 million Americans](#) with some college education and no degree.

“Many times, these adults have not had a great experience previously in education,” says Ruth Bauer White, the president of InsideTrack, which offers student success coaching. “So how do we ensure that they can reframe that education experience and have a positive outcome from it?”



MAKING IT WORK FOR ADULT LEARNERS: CREATING FLEXIBLE AND SUPPORTIVE LEARNER-FIRST PATHWAYS

However, it's not enough for institutions to provide credentials that resonate with adult learners.

That can start with making the academic experience fit within learners' lives, not the other way around. Higher education must build flexibility into its academic offerings to ensure that structural components such as the course schedule don't keep adult learners from succeeding. Institutions need to provide courses when and where learners need them, including by scheduling them around full-time work and offering multiple modalities to fit different learning styles.

[Competency-based education](#) can be [a powerful way](#) to address flexibility because it requires students to show mastery of the course material rather than adhere to seat-time requirements. Its focus on mastery also dovetails with an economy that is increasingly oriented around skills and demonstrated knowledge rather than degrees.

In addition, as students have the flexibility to learn on their own schedules, it is important that they still feel a sense of community, even in an online environment, and know where to turn for support. Academic advising, peer mentoring, mental health supports and student affinity groups can all be critical to advancing outcomes for adult learners. These are the resources that help students push

through when they're struggling or figure out how to request emergency aid to get through another semester.

"We win or lose the game with many of our learners not on the design of academics and curriculum, but on student services and support," says Paul LeBlanc, the president of Southern New Hampshire University. He notes that the challenge is especially acute with the proliferation of online education:

"We can create community with ease on a campus; we can create all kinds of venues and places to find community. It's harder online, where learners can feel more isolated. So we have to be much more attentive to the 'stickiness' and how we pull them in and give them a sense of connectedness. Academic advisors are critical because they're the people that are going to stay with students throughout their educational experience."

As NASPA president and CEO Kevin Kruger says, "You've got to have a sense of where students are experiencing challenges in order to break down some of those barriers and retool some things."

"I like to think about what it would be like for a prospective student — adult learner or a traditional student or transfer student — to see higher education be as easy to work with as Amazon, That's my dream?"

– **Bob Mong**
President, University of North Texas at Dallas

CONCLUSION



Too often, adult learners are not supported and do not find value in higher education. That has to change.

To succeed, adult learners need relevant course and credential options, holistic support from their institutions, and flexibility in their educational journey. These changes might sound radical to some institutional leaders, but they will find that such innovations benefit all students, not just adult learners. And these changes are how institutions can deliver on their moral imperative to provide real value for all learners, across all programs and learning modalities.

ADVANCING ADULT LEARNER SUCCESS RESOURCES

Building on the success and momentum of the 2020-2021 Learners First convening series, the 2022 convening series on Advancing Adult Learner Success will bring together President Forum members, partners, and higher education stakeholders to explore how higher education can reorient around the varied and diverse needs of adults in higher education.

