



ITHAKA S+R

Collaborative Strategies to Support Adult Learner Re-Enrollment and Affordability

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Ithaka S+R provides research and strategic guidance to help the academic and cultural communities serve the public good and navigate economic, technological, and demographic change.

Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We believe education is key to the wellbeing of individuals and society, and we work to make it more effective and affordable.

Partnering to Support Adult Learners



Forty-one million working-age Americans attended some college but have no credential to show for it, due to financial, administrative, or practical obstacles that stand in their way.

At Ithaka S+R, we've prioritized streamlining the path for and supporting adults on their way to a credential of value. Working across multiple states, we've seen significant positive outcomes for both adult learners *and* higher education institutions, with the promise of more to come.

Supporting adult learners across the US

We're collaborating with higher education state and system offices across the country to address the barriers facing adult learners.

- In **Kentucky**, a [technical assistance project](#) in collaboration with the Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education worked to identify barriers to re-enrolling adult learners and assess intervention opportunities.
- In **North Carolina**, we [collaborated with the University of North Carolina system](#) to assess the scope of unpaid balances and administrative holds and provide recommendations to re-enroll and re-engage a critically underserved student population.
- In **Pennsylvania**, we facilitated [a community of practice](#) with the Pennsylvania Department of Education united a wide range of postsecondary education institutions across the state to set ambitious goals and share promising practices for institutions to re-enroll and support adult learners. Explore [a playbook](#) sharing key strategies and concrete next steps to engage and support adult learners from pre-enrollment through credential completion.

ISSUE BRIEF

December 8, 2025

Supporting Adult Learner Re-Enrollment Statewide

Key Considerations from Addressing Re-Engagement and Re-Enrollment for New Jersey Learners with Some College, No Degree

Christy McDaniel, Toni-Anne Richards, Jonathan Barefield, Elizabeth Looker

PLAYBOOK

November 3, 2025

Re-Engaging Adult Learners with Some College but No Credential in Pennsylvania

A Playbook

Joanna Dressel, Toni-Anne Richards, Elizabeth Looker, Elena Crosley

Adults with Some College, No Credential

37.6 million

people in US under
age 65 with SCNC
(2025)

7.7 million

people in MHEC
region under age 65
with SCNC (2025)

Adults with Some College, No Credential

2.7%

national re-enrollment
rate for students with
SCNC (2023-2024)

68% have considered re-enrolling

High Value, Falling Trust



Belief is strong

89%

see value in credentials

58%

primary goal is a good job



Confidence is falling

18%

say 4-year cost is fair

40%

say 2-year cost is fair

What percentage of college students are over age 25 (fall 2023)?

- 11%
- 21%
- 32%
- 47%

National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Trend Generator

What percentage of college students are over age 25 (fall 2023)?

- 11%
- 21%
- **32%**
- 47%

National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Trend Generator

Who are adult learners?

- May be over 25 years old
- May be working part-time or full-time
- May have caregiving responsibilities
- May have accumulated credit from multiple institutions and sources
- May be a veteran or service member
- May be justice-impacted



Why focus on adult learners?

- Expanding access
- Increasing enrollments
- Improving student outcomes
- Achieving statewide attainment goals
- Meeting workforce and economic development needs

What Stops Adult Learners

- Financial pressures beyond tuition
- Work, family, and time constraints
- Administrative barriers (re-enrollment, credit transfer)
- Unclear pathways and outcomes

Rethinking Affordability

- Affordability is the total cost of getting to a credential
- We need to change the conversation
- Costs accumulate over time

Why Collaboration Matters

Adult learners experience fragmented systems

- Barriers compound across the student journey
- Policies, supports, and pathways can be disconnected
- One-off solutions are not enough

Coordination expands impact

- Align institutions, systems, and states
- Simplify navigation for learners
- Reduce duplication and improve scale

Collaborative
approaches to
affordability barriers
across students'
enrollment journeys

Preparation



Enrollment



Persistence



Completion



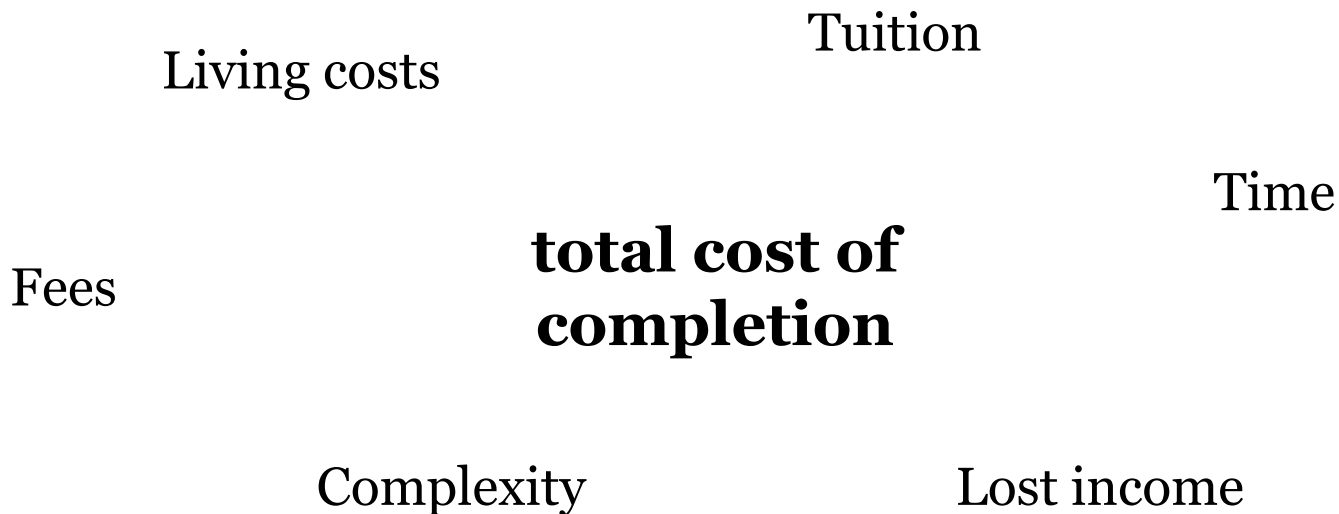
Affordability barriers show up
along the re-enrollment path

In reality, student journeys
are non-linear

Think about **adult learner enrollment paths** at the institutions you work with.

Share at your table: what are the **key affordability barriers** that show up along the journey?

Affordability barriers **compound** across the student journey



Meet Sandra

Sandra is...

- ...a working parent
- ...a former student who stopped out due to cost and owes a balance to her institution
- ...interested in returning to college to finish what she started, set an example for her child, and increase her career opportunities



Preparation



Enrollment



Persistence



Completion



Preparation: Getting student ready





Affordability is limited by information access

Institutions might not know...

- ...how many students have stopped out
- ...how to reach stopped out students
- ...what the path to re-enrollment is for these students, including what holds former students may have



When our systems lack clarity, so do students

Sandra wants to know...

- ...what are her options for returning
- ...if she has any holds, and how to address them
- ...who to talk to in order to learn more

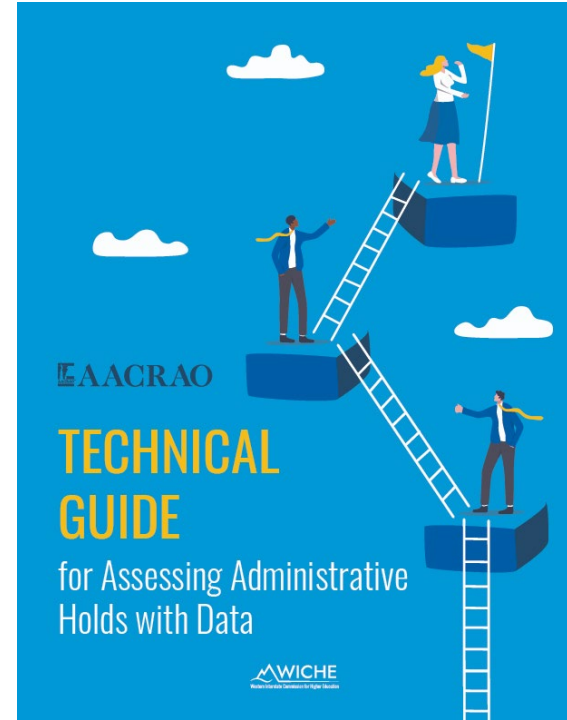




Preparation

Collaborative approaches to student data

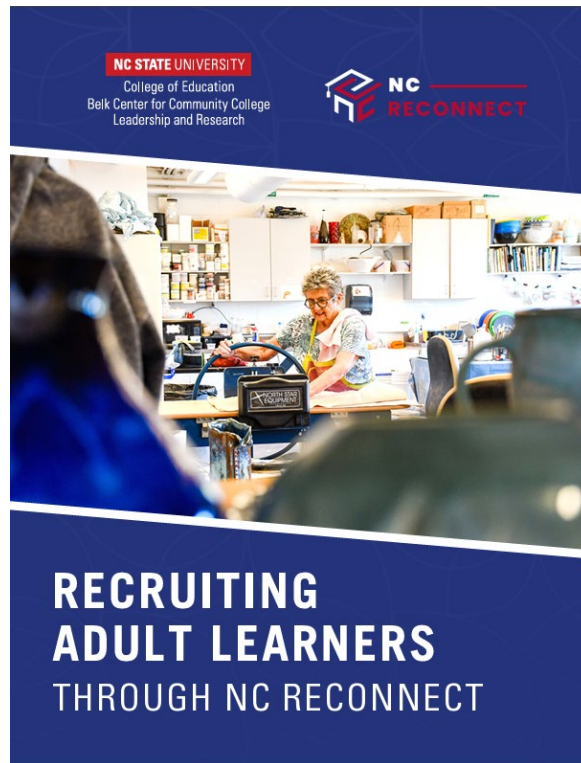
- Internal data collection and review requires **collaboration between offices**
- **Collaboration across institutions** can surface creative solutions to challenges
- **How many** learners have stopped out in your region?
- **What holds or unpaid balances** may prevent them from returning?





Collaborative approaches to communication

- **Coordinated, multi-channel campaigns** to former students can engage learners and create awareness of re-enrollment paths
- **Community partnerships across your ecosystem** can meet learners where they are and help connect them to support resources
- **Audit web pages** at to ensure adult learner experiences, needs, and next steps are represented



Preparation



Enrollment



Persistence



Completion



Enrollment: Supporting students through administrative processes





Affordability is limited by a lack of support

Confusion around next steps for enrollment leads to **disengagement**

Sandra...

- isn't clear on the total cost of enrollment or her aid options
- is unsure how to manage a past due balance
- doesn't know which program options are the best fit for her





Collaborative approaches to enrollment navigation

- **Dedicated and institutional neutral professionals** help learners select programs, understand cost and aid, access support services.
- **Proactive outreach** by these professionals that incorporates coaching can help learners feel confident and supported.





Collaborative approaches to **past due balances**

- Approximately **6.6 million learners have unpaid balances preventing re-enrollment**
- Adding **balance cancellation** to re-enrollment initiatives
 - Addresses a **major financial barrier** for learners with SCNC
 - Brings in **new tuition** well above expected collections
 - Increases the number of adults able to **finish their credentials**



Preparation



Enrollment



Persistence



Completion



Persistence: Transparency and resources for affordability

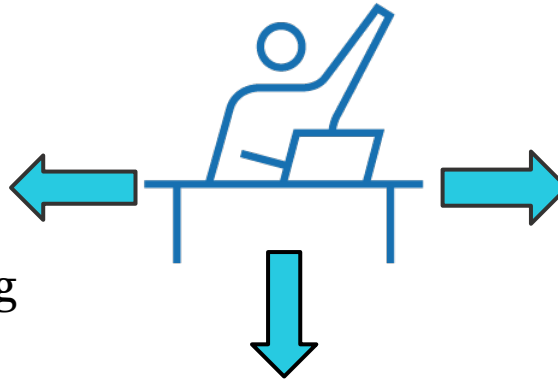




Financial instability can interrupt persistence

Ongoing financial pressures

- Financing multiple semesters
- Balancing work, caregiving and living expenses



Aid complexity

- FAFSA complexity
- SAP eligibility

Basic needs costs

- Priority emergency expenses (housing, childcare, etc.)

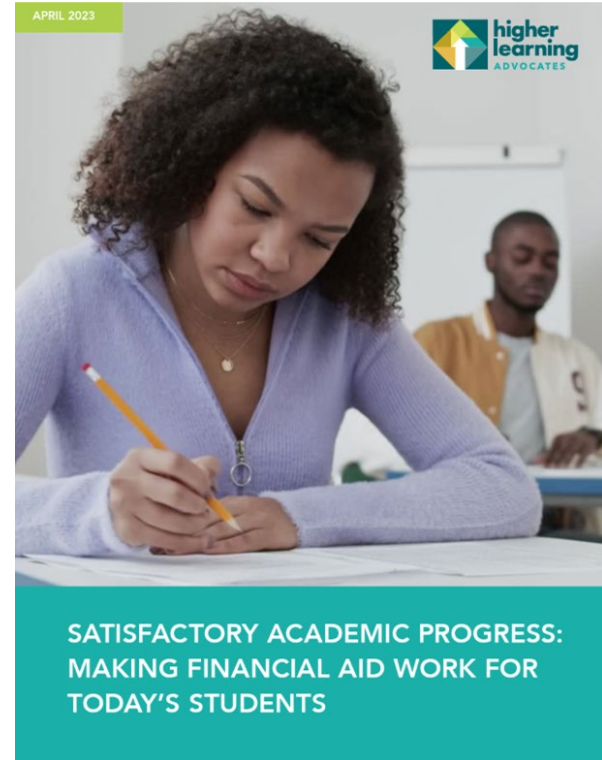


Collaborative approaches to aid support and communication

Flexible state aid programs create alternative options for adult learners

Aligned institutional approaches:

- coordinate financial aid, advising, and student support around early communication
- make aid status and appeal options clearer before eligibility issues become crises





Collaborative approaches to **basic needs supports**

- **State funding** braids emergency aid, benefits navigation, and basic needs resources into a more **coherent support network**
- **Ohio Community College Acceleration Program** and **Ohio ASAP Network** create infrastructure for **shared learning, sustainable funding, and cross-agency coordination**



**College Prices in the
Great Lakes Region:
Examining State
Strategies to Improve
Postsecondary
Affordability**

Preparation



Enrollment



Persistence



Completion



**Completion:
Minimizing time to
degree and connecting
to value**

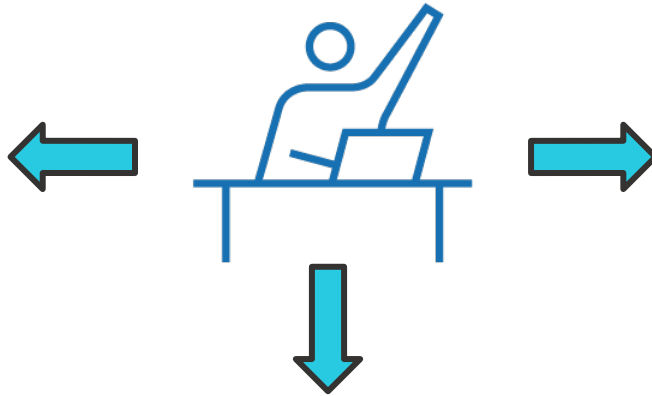




Unclear pathways can increase time, cost, and uncertainty

Limited course availability

- Delays in course completion



Workforce alignment

- Unclear connection to workforce opportunities

Credit mobility issues

- Credit loss or excess credits

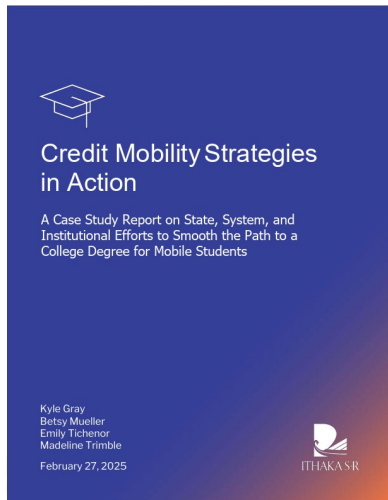


Completion

Collaborative approaches to **credit mobility** and **workforce alignment**

Cohort models facilitate **shared learning** and can **encourage alignment** at different levels

Coalition models use **shared data** to compare outcomes across programs and institutions



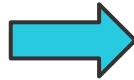


Completion

Supporting affordability across **persistence** and **completion**



Persistence



Completion

- Clearer aid communication to maintain eligibility
- Accessible basic needs support to manage financial disruptions

- Flexible transfer policies reduce time to degree
- Accessible data on workforce outcomes to clarify potential outcomes

Change is possible through
coordinated solutions

The Collaboration Opportunity

Align around shared goals

- Communicate the value of higher education
- Address affordability holistically
- Coordinate support across the student journey

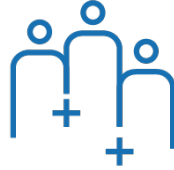
Work together to scale impact

- Reach more learners
- Reduce duplication
- Create clearer pathways to re-enrollment and completion

Shared Responsibility for Adult Learner Affordability

States	Align policy, funding, transfer, and attainment goals
Institutions	Simplify re-enrollment and create flexible student pathways
Nonprofits	Provide navigation, outreach, and cross-sector coordination
Employers	Connect credentials to workforce needs and career advancement
Workforce Agencies	Link learners to career pathways, training, and public benefits
Philanthropy	Fund innovation, pilot programs, and scaling

Moving to Action



- Adult learners want education, but affordability is a consistent barrier
- Barriers across the full student journey are often institutional, not motivational
- Affordability must be addressed across the full student journey
- No single organization can solve this alone; coordination facilitates success and scale



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