Pennsylvania
State Board of Higher Education

State Policies to Increase Adult Learner Enrollment, Retention and Attainment in Postsecondary Education

Summary of Research and Evidence-Based Best Practices

September 2026

Executive Summary

This brief highlights a range of strategies that states have used to re-engage adult learners in postsecondary education. As the number of traditionally-aged students drops and Pennsylvania's workforce needs grow, adult learners are an increasingly important demographic.

Strategies reviewed in this brief include Adult Reconnect programs, Credit for Prior Learning, Workforce Development initiatives, and Apprenticeships. Concrete examples from leading states are included, along with comparative analyses where possible.

The Importance of Adult Learners in Postsecondary Education

Colleges and universities are serving a more diverse set of undergraduate students who often do not enroll in a postsecondary education institution immediately after high school. Adult learners are commonly defined as postsecondary education students who are over the age of 24 when they enter or re-enter a two- or four-year postsecondary institution. In Pennsylvania, about 37% of postsecondary education students are 25 or older.[1] These students often attend part time, work full time, have some financial independence, and/or have dependents.

The goals of adult learners for their postsecondary education tend to focus on vocational training and short-term programs, enrolling in pathways for vocational certificates and associate degrees instead of a bachelor's degree. They are also less likely to complete a postsecondary credential compared with their peers who enroll immediately after high school graduation. Many adult learners look for educational options that will improve their earnings with the flexibility they need to meet other obligations.[2]

Pennsylvania's adult population is essential in the 21st century economy. According to the data from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, by 2031,65 percent of jobs in the Commonwealth will require postsecondary education or training, and 23 percent of those jobs will require at least a bachelor's degree .[3] Further, according to the Future of Jobs Report 2025, nearly two-fifths of the skills workers are using now may change or become outdated by 2030, emphasizing the need to return to a postsecondary institution for updated credentials.[4]

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[1] *Today's Students, Higher Learning Advocates. (2022, October). Pennsylvania: Who are today's students? [State data profile].*
[2] *Berkner, L.K., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., and McCormick, A.C. (1996). Descriptive Summary of 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students 5 Years Later: With an Essay on Postsecondary Persistence and Attainment (NCES 96-155). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; Berkner, L.K., He, S., and Cataldi, E.F. (2002). Descriptive Summary of 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students Six Years Later (NCES 2003-151). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; Horn, L. (1996). Nontraditional undergraduates, trends in enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and persistence and attainment among 1989-90 beginning postsecondary students (NCES 97-578): U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; Horn, L., Cataldi, E.F., and Sikora, A. (2005). Waiting to Attend College: Undergraduates Who Delay Their Postsecondary Enrollment (NCES 2005-152). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.*
[3] *Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. (2023). After Everything: Projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031—State report [State report].*
[4] *World Economic Forum. (2025, January). Future of Jobs Report 2025 [Insight report].*

Pennsylvania has a large workforce shortage, especially in education and healthcare.[5] Enrollment in postsecondary education institutions is decreasing across the country, including in Pennsylvania's PASSHE system, as birthrates decline and people question the value of a college education.[6] To increase postsecondary enrollment and meet the state's workforce demands, Pennsylvania will need to focus on not just traditionally aged students, but also getting adult learners back into the classroom and helping them to succeed in completing a degree or credential.

Strategies To Increase Adult Enrollment And Attainment

1. Reconnect Initiatives for Adult Learners with Some College but No Credential

Many states have recognized the need to encourage adult learners with some college but no degree or credential to come back to a postsecondary institution to complete their education. Here, we refer to these efforts as Reconnect initiatives. At least ten states currently have such programs in place. As shown in Table 1 below, strategies included in these programs vary by state, but commonly include the use of data analytics to identify potential adult learners, coaching outreach to encourage and help students apply, enroll, and in some cases succeed, and financial aid to help address the high cost of a postsecondary education. In some cases, these programs also focus on high demand and high income fields in the state. While some postsecondary institutions also have programs specific to their campus, this analysis only includes programs that are statewide.

Table 1. State approaches for adult learners with some college but no degree or credential

State Program	Data Analytics	Coaching Outreach	Financial Aid for Students	Alignment with Industry Needs
Re(Engage) Alabama			•	•
California Reconnect		•		
Maryland One Step Away State Grant Program	Varies by institution receiving a grant from the state			
MassReconnect			•	
Michigan Reconnect	•	•	•	
New Jersey Some College, No Degree	•	•		
NC Reconnect		•		
Reach Higher Oklahoma		•	•	•
SUNY Reconnect		•	•	•
Tennessee Reconnect		•	•	

[5] *Kocher, R. (2026, May 22). Find where PA might have most job openings in 10 years. GoErie.com.*
[6] *Frank Gamrat, Ph.D. (2025, October 22). PASSHE struggles continue. Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.*

Below we provide an overview of common Reconnect elements and provide evidence of their effectiveness.

A. Data Analytics

States are working in partnership with external organizations to leverage data sets to identify potential adult learners. In both Michigan and New Jersey, ReUp has included data analytics as a strategy to identify potential adult learners who can be targeted for outreach, which has led to positive student outcomes. Michigan Reconnect was found to have significantly increased adult enrollment in community colleges by 38%, with larger gains among women and younger adults (ages 25–34).[7] ReUp reported that their work in New Jersey has resulted in over 13,500 reenrollments and over 1,400 graduates. Further, New Jersey institutions partnering with ReUp have realized an estimated $74 million in recaptured tuition revenue.[8] Additionally, data analyses conducted through CommpAPP to identify potential adult learners for the Colorado Community College System has led to a 16% increase in annual student enrollment since the 2020–21 academic year.[9] The programs include the following strategies around data analytics:

- In Michigan, ReUp identified trends from lists of students who have stopped out of a postsecondary institution to provide analyses that lead to data-informed outreach to potential adult learners.[10]

- In New Jersey, ReUp has similarly compiled a list of 299,047 learners eligible for outreach, and provided a report to each participating institution with early results and key findings on topics such as student GPA, years out of school, motivations and barriers to return.

While not at the state level, CollegeAPP is working with systems such as the Colorado Community College System to analyze data and identify adult residents who are most likely to re-enroll in college, allowing for targeted messaging. CollegeAPP identified over two million adults with intent to enroll in a postsecondary education from Colorado's adult population, then segmented these adults by their level of college completion.[11]

B. Coaching Outreach

More commonly, states are using coaches or "navigators" to reach out to potential adult learners and encourage them to consider re-enrolling in a postsecondary education program. This outreach comes in many forms, including emails, texts, and phone calls. Early outcomes on this strategy are promising. For example, between 2024 and 2026, Education Northwest conducted an evaluation of California Reconnect and found that coaching was closely linked to re-enrollment and persistence; students who engaged with a coach accounted for 59 percent of all re-enrolled students. Learners who met with coaches were also more likely to persist: 38 percent of coached learners persisted to the following term, compared with 22 percent of uncoached learners.[12] The data from Inside Track's work in North Carolina has shown that 28% of NC Reconnect learners have earned a degree or credential after returning to college, and 17% of the graduates earned a degree or credential within the first year back.[13] The inaugural report on Tennessee's Navigate Reconnect found that students who worked with a Navigate Reconnect coach stayed in school or completed a technical certificate or degree at higher rates (11 percentage

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[7] (2025). SagePub. Educational Researcher. Advance online publication.
[8] ReUp Education. (2025, December). Some College, No Degree Initiative: New Jersey Impact Report [State impact report].
[9] Adult Prospect Pipeline. (n.d.). Colorado Community College System case study [Case study]. Adult Prospect Pipeline.
[10] ReUp Education. (2026, March). Michigan Re-Enrollment Marketplace Impact Report [State impact report].
[11] Adult Prospect Pipeline. (n.d.). Colorado Community College System case study [Case Study].
[12] Uriostegui, M., Davis, L., López Trujillo, P., & Vazquez Cano, M. (2026, May). From Stopping Out to Stepping Forward: California Reconnect Initiative Year Two Evaluation Findings [Evaluation report]. Education Northwest.
[13] InsideTrack. (n.d.). NC Reconnect: Re-enrollment coaching helps stopped-out students return, complete and gain higher-wage jobs [Case study]

points higher) than those who did not work with a Navigator.[14] Examples of coaching strategies include the following:

- ReUp's partnerships in Michigan and New Jersey also include coaches. Michigan Reconnect Navigators provide one-on-one support to students by answering their individual questions about the program and helping them in completing their FAFSA. In New Jersey, coaches help to connect potential adult learners to financial aid opportunities and develop personalized time management strategies.
- California Reconnect coaches help potential adult learners navigate the re-enrollment process by setting goals and milestones and connecting them with campus staff members. The coaches use multiple and repeated outreach methods to recruit potential adult learners. Students who decide to re-enroll in college can continue to work with a CA Reconnect Coach during their first semester.[15]
- In North Carolina, InsideTrack re-enrollment coaching was piloted at five community colleges and then expanded to all 29 community colleges included in the NC Reconnect program. Coaches worked with students to create a plan to address the difficulties they faced in returning to school and the potential challenges they would endure advancing toward their degree.[16]
- Tennessee Reconnect Navigators provide college navigation services, career exploration tools, and assistance with financial aid. Once an adult learner has enrolled in a postsecondary institution, they continue to support, guide and encourage students until graduation.[17]

Reach Higher Oklahoma and SUNY Reconnect also reported the use of similar coaches, but descriptions on the roles of those staff were limited.

C. Financial Aid

The largest barrier to a postsecondary education is the cost, so to address this hurdle, many of the programs offer financial aid to eligible adult learners. In most cases, these programs provide "last-dollar" scholarships that cover the remaining costs of a postsecondary education after all other federal, state, and institutional grants and scholarships have already been applied[18], as is the case with (Re)Enage Alabama, SUNY Reconnect, and Tennessee Reconnect. Additionally, MassReconnect funds free community college certificates and degrees including all costs related to tuition, fees, books and supplies. Michigan Reconnect pays for students to attend an in-district community college tuition-free or offers a large tuition discount for students attending an out-of-district community college. Reach Higher Oklahoma offers Finish Line Scholarships; however, unlike many of the other programs, the scholarship amount is determined by the institution upon review of applications and available funding.

Again, outcomes from financial aid seem promising. For example, community college enrollment among adults age 25 and over rose by 12% (2,635 students) from fall 2022 to fall 2023, with 9% (2,423 new students) of the increase attributed to MassReconnect grant recipients.[19] As mentioned earlier, Michigan

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[14] *Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2025, January 10). Tennessee's Navigate Reconnect shows strong impact on non-traditional students, increasing college enrollment outcomes [Press release]. State of Tennessee.*
[15] *California Reconnect. (n.d.). California Reconnect [Program website].*
[16] *InsideTrack. (n.d.). NC Reconnect: Re-enrollment coaching helps stopped-out students return, complete, and gain higher-wage jobs [Case study].*
[17] *Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2025, January 10). Tennessee's Navigate Reconnect shows strong impact on non-traditional students, increasing college enrollment outcomes [Press release]. State of Tennessee.*
[18] *Tennessee Reconnect Grants are not last-dollar at four-year institutions; the amount of funding students receive is based on the average amount of tuition and fees.*
[19] *Hildreth Institute. (2024, November 8). Early findings from the MassReconnect program: Expanding free community college access for adult learners [Evaluation insight].*

Reconnect was found to have increased adult enrollment in community colleges by 38%, with larger gains among women and younger adults (ages 25–34).[20] In Tennessee, about 40 percent of students who received the Reconnect grant, between 2018 and 2023, earned a credential by the summer of 2024. Students who received the Reconnect grant showed stronger outcomes than similar students who did not receive the grant.[21]

Eligibility requirements for financial aid have some similar characteristics, but also can vary, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Eligibility requirements for states that include financial aid for adult learners

State Program	Education	Residency or Commitment	Age	Academic Credits	Institutions	Other Criteria
Re(Engage) Alabama	Graduate of a secondary school or equivalent of a high school graduate and no postsecondary degree	Citizen and lawful permanent resident of the United States and Alabama resident	25 or older	≥36 credit hours for an associate degree or ≥72 credit hours for a baccalaureate degree	Public four-year, public two-year & private, non-profit institutions	At least two (2) years (24 consecutive months) prior to current enrollment
Mass Reconnect	High school diploma or equivalent but no postsecondary degree	U.S. Citizen, lawful permanent resident, or eligible non-citizen and state resident at least 1 year with the intent to stay	25 or older on first day of classes	Enrolled on a full-time or part-time basis (≥6 credits or equivalent) in an eligible program	Public two-year institutions	Complete FAFSA/ state equivalent application, comply with financial aid requirements, and not be in default on student loans
Michigan Reconnect	High school diploma, high school equivalency, or certificate of completion and no postsecondary degree	Lived in Michigan for a year or more	25 or older when applying	Not specified	Public two-year institutions	None
Reach Higher Oklahoma: Flex Finish	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified	≥72 credit hours and ≥2.0 GPA in past college courses	Public four-year, public two-year & private, non-profit institutions	Completed general education and remedial education requirements
Reach Higher Oklahoma: Direct Degree	Not Specified	Sign a commitment form to pursue a degree connected with an occupation on Oklahoma's 100 Critical Occupations	Age 25-49	45 credit hours toward an associate degree OR 60 credit hours toward a baccalaureate degree; 2.0 GPA		Annual income below $75,000, completion of FAFSA, and enrollment in at least 6 credit hours/semester
SUNY Reconnect	No college degree	New York State resident	Age 25-55	Not specified	Public two-year institutions	Planning to study full- or part-time in an eligible degree program
Tennessee Reconnect	No postsecondary degree	Tennessee resident and U.S. citizen or eligible non-citizen	23 or older[22] OR Independent[23] student on FAFSA	Be admitted to and enroll in an eligible institution for a minimum 6 hours in courses leading to certificate or degree	Public four-year, public two-year & private, non-profit institutions	Not incarcerated, not in student loan default, submit transcripts from previous institutions

As shown in Table 2, eligible students typically have a high school diploma or equivalent, are at least 25 years old, a United States citizen, a resident of the appropriate state, and have completed a portion of the credits required for the degree program in which they are enrolled or plan to enroll. Participating institutions vary by state, but can include public four-year, public two-year, and private, non-profit institutions.

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[20] *Mumpower, J. E. (2026, May 13). Comptroller review finds Tennessee Reconnect enrollment declining, but participants see positive outcomes [Evaluation report]. Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability.*

[21] *Mumpower, J. E. (2026, May 13). Comptroller review finds Tennessee Reconnect enrollment declining, but participants see positive outcomes [Evaluation report]. Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability.*

[22] *At least 23 years of age on or before January 1 of the academic year of initial enrollment*

[23] *An "independent" student is defined as one of the following: at least 24 years old, married, a graduate or professional student, a veteran, a member of the armed forces, an orphan, a ward of the court, or someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Please see https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/filling-out/dependency for a complete list.*

D. Alignment with Industry Needs

In several states, student participation in these programs is tied to workforce needs:

- The (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program was designed, in part, to encourage adult learners to complete a college degree program connected with the workforce development needs aligned with Alabama's high demand occupations list.
- Reach Higher Oklahoma's Direct Complete program is designed to help adults who have earned some college credit complete a degree linked to a critical occupation as designated by Oklahoma Works' 100 Critical Occupations list. Partnerships with businesses, tribes, workforce development agencies, nonprofit organizations and foundations, federal and state agencies and other groups provide scholarships, grants and other support to adult students who pursue degree programs within the program.
- Eligible programs under SUNY Reconnect include associate degree programs in high-demand areas of advanced manufacturing; nursing and allied health; engineering; technology, cybersecurity, and AI; green jobs; supply chain management; aviation; emergency management; and teaching pathways in shortage areas.

State funding levels for these programs vary, as shown in Table 3. Part of the variation may be based on the number of residents under the age of 65 with some college but no credential; Pennsylvania has about one million people (1,047,644) in this category, most similar to Michigan. While most are funded as part of the state budget, NC Connect is privately funded and Tennessee is Reconnect is funded through the state lottery.

Table 3. State funding for some college but no degree or credential programs, including eligible populations

State Program	*Some College, No Credential < Age 65[24]	# Students Re-enrolled	State Funding (Years Vary)
(Re)Engage Alabama	437,108	Data Unavailable	S.B. 175 allocated a $4.5 million in 2023 and another $4.5 million in 2024.[25][26]
California Reconnect	5,941,080	2,110 (2023-25)[27]	California Reconnect operates under the $50.4 billion higher education allocation in the 2026-27 state budget.[28]
Maryland One Step Away	602,232	Data Unavailable	Just over $2.6 million[29] was available from the state, with the expectation that at least 1/3 of the total institutional costs would be covered by in-kind/matching funds.[30]
MassReconnect	675,920	4,501 (Fall 2023)[31]	The Healey-Driscoll administration allocated $20 million in the FY2024 budget to launch MassReconnect.[32]
Michigan Reconnect	1,093,393	29,600 (2024-25)[33]	Funding was introduced in Governor Whitmer's FY 2020-21 budget proposal with $30 million provided.[34]
New Jersey Some College, No Degree	757,282	~13,500 since 2023[35]	In FY2024, New Jersey awarded $3.3 million in grant funding to public and independent postsecondary institutions through the program.[36]
NC Reconnect	996,524	3,098 Fall 2021-25 [37]	NC Reconnect is primary funded by the John M. Belk Endowment[38]
Reach Higher Oklahoma	413,576	Data Unavailable	Varies by program
SUNY Reconnect	1,936,325	>5,600 since Fall 2025[39]	Almost $35 million was in the FY 2027 state budget for the New York Opportunity Promise Scholarship, which includes SUNY Reconnect.[40]
Tennessee Reconnect	602,412	7,828 (2023-24)[41]	Funding is through the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS), with $19,662,950 in expenditures for FY2023-24.[42]

**Data from January 2022 – July 2023*

[24] *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2025, June 4). Some College, No Credential: 2025 report for the nation and the states [Research report].*
[25] *Starting in fall 2026, eligible students can receive up to $3,000/term for a four-year or $1,500/term for a two-year institution. Tinker, A. (2026, July 8). Alabama Commission on Higher Education approves financial aid programs for fall semester. Alabama Reflector.*
[26] *Third Sector Capital Partners. (2025, May). (Re)Engage Alabama impact report: Higher education institutions reengage adult learners to complete degrees [Two-page summary].*
[27] *Uriostegui, M., Davis, L., López Trujillo, P., & Vazquez Cano, M. (2026, May). From Stopping Out to Stepping Forward: California Reconnect initiative year-two evaluation findings [Evaluation report]. Education Northwest.*
[28] *California Department of Finance. (2026, June 29). 2026-27 budget summary: Higher education*
[29] *Accredited Maryland public and nonprofit independent two- and four-year, associate and bachelor's degree granting colleges and universities are eligible.*
[30] *Maryland Higher Education Commission. (n.d.). One Step Away grant program for near-completer students [Program information].*
[31] *Hildreth Institute. (2024, November 8). Early findings from the MassReconnect program: Expanding free community college access for adult learners [Evaluation insight].*
[32] *Massachusetts Executive Office for Administration and Finance. (2024). FY 2024 budget recommendation: Budget brief on MassReconnect [Budget brief].*
[33] *State of Michigan. (n.d.). Reconnect Data Dashboard [Data dashboard*
[34] *UP Michigan Works!. (2026, March – date unspecified). Gov. Whitmer launches bipartisan $30 M Michigan Reconnect program: New scholarship initiative offers historic tuition-free opportunity [News release].*
[35] *ReUp Education. (2025, November). New Jersey Impact Report: Some College, No Degree Initiative [State impact report].*
[36] *New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education. (2023, July 5). FY 24 budget passage press release [Press release].*
[37] *Belk Center (North Carolina State University). (2025, November 20). Reconnect 4-Year Evaluation Brief [Evaluation brief]*
[38] *Belk Center (North Carolina State University). (n.d.). NC Reconnect partnerships and convenings [Program web page].*
[39] *State University of New York (SUNY). (2025, November 18). Governor Hochul announces enrollment gains across SUNY for third consecutive year [Press release]. SUNY.*
[40] *Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS). (2026, June 2). New York FY27 budget reflects value of higher education investment [Statement]. TICAS.*
[41] *New York State Division of the Budget. (n.d.). Open Budget Home [Website].*
[42] *Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Research and Education Accountability. (2026, May). Tennessee Reconnect grant evaluation [Evaluation report]. State of Tennessee.*

2. Credit for Prior Learning

Postsecondary institutions sometimes award academic credit for a student's knowledge and expertise acquired through life and professional experience, as long as the student's knowledge and skills are determined to be equivalent to college-level learning; this is referred to as credit for prior learning, or CPL.[43] Common methods for evaluating this learning through CPL include portfolio assessments, internal and external exams (e.g., the College Level Examination Program [CLEP], DANTES Subject Standardized Tests [DSST], challenge exams), or credit recommendations from third-party evaluators such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS). Additionally, institutions may develop their own internal processes for reviewing certifications, licenses, apprenticeships, and corporate training programs to award credit.

By encouraging states and systems to recognize and value prior learning that occurs outside formal academic settings, CPL policies provide adult learners with opportunities to accelerate their progress toward a degree or credential. Research has shown that facilitating the award of CPL can boost degree completion by 17 percent; it is particularly beneficial to advance college completion among adult learners, as well as other traditionally underserved student groups. CPL also helps students save both time and money by reducing the number of courses required for a degree, thereby accelerating their path to graduation, with adult learners saving on average 9-14 months.[44] Similarly, adult learners who earned CPL saved $1,500 to $10,200 in tuition dollars.[45] As a result, CPL serves as a tool to recruit, reengage, and accelerate degree completion for adult learners.

The American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) gathered and analyze state CPL policies across all 50 U.S. states as well as the District of Columbia and identified 11 common CPL policy themes, outlined in Table 4 below.[46]

Table 4. Common CPL Policy Themes

Policy Themes	Definitions
Require a Policy	Policies that provide a mandate for all state or system institutions to establish a policy on CPL
Focus on Transparency	Policies that require CPL-related information to be made public, such as published on a website or made accessible to students
Military Training	Policies that concern the awarding of credit to service members or veterans for their military training or experience, such as boot camp credits, advanced standing for military medics, or ACE-recognized military credits
Credit Caps and Limits	Policies that set limits on how much CPL can be applied toward a degree (e.g., CPL cannot exceed 25 percent of degree requirements) or require a minimum number of credits to be completed at the institution
Cost/Affordability	Policies that address the costs of CPL, including the setting of fees or fee limits and offering scholarships or waivers for certain student populations
Transfer Policy	Policies that specifically address the transfer of CPL credits between institutions; this includes guidelines for accepting CPL credits awarded by other institutions

[43] *Education Commission of the States (ECS). (2018, August). Opening Credits: An introduction to prior learning assessment policies [Policy analysis]. ECS.*
[44] *Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). (2021). Recognizing prior learning in the 21st century: A synthesis brief [Brief]. WICHE.*
[45] *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (n.d.). Credit for prior learning [Resource page]. CAEL.*
[46] *American Council on Education & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). The national landscape of credit for prior learning: Effective state and system policies for success and equity [Report]. ACE.*

Transcription Policy	Policies that provide guidance on how CPL credits should be recorded on student transcripts; this may include recommendations for institutions to merely establish a formal policy on the treatment of CPL credits
Methods of Assessment	Policies that outline policies and procedures related to specific methods for assessing CPL, such as CLEP exam credits, portfolio assessments, ACE credit recommendations, or the conversion of noncredit learning into college credits
Data Tracking	Policies that require the collection and reporting of data related to CPL, such as tracking the number of students using CPL, the number of CPL credits awarded, or related metrics
Evaluation of Effectiveness	Policies that call for a formal evaluation of CPL program effectiveness, including the analysis of key metrics or outcomes to assess the impact of CPL on students and institutions
CPL for Professional License Requirements or Apprenticeship	Policies that address how prior learning can be applied toward occupational license requirements or apprenticeships, such as recognizing work experience or CPL credits to fulfill specific professional or licensing criteria; policies that referenced the review of licenses and apprenticeship for awarding college credit toward degrees were categorized under Methods of Assessment

State and System CPL Policies to Consider

While states commonly adopt policies *allowing* public postsecondary institutions to award CPL or *providing guidance* in this area, it is less common for states to develop policies that *require* institutions in *both the two- and four-year sectors* to enact CPL policies. While not as common, some of these states and systems also have policies to facilitate CPL *transfer*. This section highlights such approaches; for example:

- Colorado's Student Bill of Rights *requires each public institution* to adopt a policy or program to award CPL credit. More specifically, it states that: "Students have the right to know what work-related experiences or prior learning opportunities are awarded postsecondary academic credit at the institution in which the student is enrolled."[47] State statute (C.R.S. 23-5-145) requires each governing board of a state institution of higher education to adopt, make public, and implement a prior learning assessment policy for awarding academic credit for college-level learning acquired while in the military. It further requires institutions to "accept in *transfer* from within the institution and from other state institutions of higher education prior learning assessment credit awarded for courses with guaranteed-transfer designation." Postsecondary institutions must further grant CPL credit free of tuition, but can charge a fee for assessment.[48]

- The Credit for Prior Learning Act in Illinois requires *public universities and community colleges* to submit policies for awarding academic credit to the Board of Higher Education or the Illinois Community College Board respectively for review and approval. Public universities and community colleges must include a listing of the types of documentation acceptable to the public university and the dates of inclusion for which prior learning is acceptable.[49]

- The Minnesota State University System *requires universities and colleges* to implement procedures to award CPL, and provides requirements for those procedures. Institutional polices must be aligned with the American Council on Education or equivalent standards. However, a student awarded credits based on CPL who transfers to another college or university within the Minnesota State system must

[47] *Colorado Department of Higher Education. (n.d.). What is the Student Bill of Rights?*
[48] *Colorado Revised Statutes. (n.d.).§ 23-5-145: Credit for military education and training — policy — definition.*
[49] *Illinois General Assembly. (2017). Public Act 100-0261.*

have their transcript evaluated by the receiving college or university, but the receiving college or university is expected to "*honor the original course equivalency* to the greatest extent possible."[50]

- The State University System of New York (SUNY) has instituted a *comprehensive approach that ensures consistency across campuses*. SUNY revised their Award of Academic Credit by Evaluation policy in 2023 and expanded the types of prior learning that could count for credit. The policy also states that credit earned through CPL at one SUNY university is *guaranteed to transfer* to any other SUNY campus.[51]

- The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission also *requires that state colleges and universities* develop policies for awarding CPL. Policies must apply to all academic programs. Awarded credits can apply towards majors, minors, general education and electives, and can satisfy prerequisite requirements. Awarded credits do not count toward institutional residency requirements and are not to be used to determine GPA or graduation honors. CPL awarded at one institution, which meets the West Virginia Core Coursework Transfer Agreement or other statewide articulation agreements, *must be accepted as transfer credit* toward the degree if the student transfers to another West Virginia public college or university in accordance with the guidelines of that particular policy or agreement. [52]

- Washington's Student Achievement Council requires all public, private independent, and community colleges to collaborate to review, evaluate, and award CPL. State statute (RCW28B.77.230) requires the development of transparent policies and practices ensuring credit is awarded for high quality, course -level competencies. It further necessitates that CPL awarded contributes toward credential completion, outcome measures to track progress, and outlines workgroup representation. WSAC provides a framework and *Prior Learning Toolkit* to ensure the implementation of consistent, transparent, and scalable standards statewide for CPL.

States can also *align their CPL policies with the Reconnect initiatives* discussed earlier; for example:

- An amendment to the Reconnect Grant Act (PA 251 of 2022) created an incentive payment for Reconnect-participating colleges in Michigan who award CPL to Reconnect students—adults who are using the Michigan Reconnect scholarship to attend a Pell-eligible program at one of Michigan's community or tribal colleges. Participating colleges who were awarded CPL would be issued a payment of $80.00 per credit awarded to Reconnect students.[53]

- It is also worth noting that the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education recently launched a new website, ShowWhatYouKnowOK.org, targeting students who would like to earn college credit for knowledge gained through work and life experiences, non-degree-granting institutions, military training or other learning environments. The site outlines options for adults who have earned previous college credits and are interested in completing a degree program, those who have attended a career technology center or hold industry-recognized credentials, members or veterans of the armed services who have completed military study and training, and high school graduates looking to

[50] *Minnesota State Colleges & Universities. (n.d.). Board policy procedure 3.35.1: Credit for prior learning.*
[51] *American Council on Education. (2024). The national landscape of credit for prior learning: Effective state and system policies for success and equity.*
[52] *West Virginia Secretary of State. (n.d.). Higher Education Policy Commission Rule — Series 3: Authority and Accountability [PDF].*
[53] *Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP). (2024). 2023–2024 Credit for Prior Learning Report [State report]*

use advanced standing scores for college credit. The site also connects users to information about financial aid and the state's initiative for adult learners mentioned previously, Reach Higher.

3. State Workforce Development Programs

The term "workforce development" encompasses a range of services and offerings. At its broadest, it includes a large set of activities aimed at enhancing the skills and employability of workers.[54] Outside of traditional programs in the K-12 sector and bachelor's degree programs in postsecondary education, workforce education and training can include on-the-job training such as apprenticeships and internships, certificate programs, two-year vocational degrees, and pre-employment training.[55]
It is particularly instructive to examine what states similar to Pennsylvania can teach us about effective approaches to connecting adults to workforce development opportunities that incorporate postsecondary education. Michigan, New York, and Ohio are in the Great Lakes region, have an economic history of manufacturing like Pennsylvania, and include between one- and two-million people under the age of 65 with some college but no credential (Pennsylvania has just over one million people in this group). In addition, we highlight a leading workforce initiative in Virginia.
The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) connects workers and employers through regional partnerships. While WIOA establishes a national framework, states have discretion in how they implement programs and remain the primary drivers of innovation. In their review of state models for workforce development, Jobs for the Future also identified Michigan and Ohio as leading states in "strengthening the effectiveness of federal workforce programs."[56]

A. *Michigan*

The state has an integrated governance and service delivery structure for workforce development that helps to reduce fragmentation and coordinate programming across sectors. For example:

- The Michigan Statewide Workforce Plan has three pillars: 1) Increase the number of people with a degree or skill certificate; 2) Create opportunities for people to move into the middle class by eliminating barriers to employment, and 3) Support businesses and entrepreneurs through talent solutions.
- The Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) requires all WIOA-funded training to lead to a recognized credential and has aligned workforce, education, and human services systems around shared economic outcomes.[57]

Michigan has further created programs that partner industry and postsecondary institutions to provide training opportunities; for example:

- The EV Jobs Academy program is a collaboration between EV (electric vehicle) and auto industry firms, state and local governments and *community colleges*. The program provides tuition support for EV-industry-approved associate degrees offered at community colleges throughout Michigan.[58]
- The New Jobs Training Program funds training for employers creating new jobs in Michigan and must take place at a *community college*. The program authorizes community colleges to temporarily capture the state income tax withholding associated with newly hired workers to pay for training.[59]

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[54] *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. (n.d.). What is workforce development?*
[55] *Altman, M., & Schrag, J. (2025). Workforce development: A modern framework for building skills and economic mobility [Brookings report]. Brookings Institution.*
[56] *Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2026, July). State models for effective workforce development [Policy brief].*
[57] *Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2026, July). State models for effective workforce development [Policy brief].*
[58] *Michigan Alliance for Automotive Mobility. (n.d.). EV Jobs Academy [Program page].*
[59] *Michigan Community College Association (MCCA). (n.d.). MNJTP program overview [One-pager].*

- The Going PRO Talent Fund is the state's primary fund for expanding employer-driven training by reimbursing businesses for short-term training for both incumbent workers and new hires.

Between 2014 and 2026, Michigan's Going Pro Talent Fund supported 8,966 businesses and more than 241,000 workers, with 91% of awards going to small- and midsize employers. In fiscal year 2024 alone, the fund supported over 32,000 trainees with average hourly wage gains of 6.2%.[60]

B. New York

The New York Workforce Development Initiative invested $175 million in 2019 to fund projects in public-private partnerships to *help universities meet employer needs and employers build their workforce development pipelines*, as well as provide funding for workforce development projects in advanced manufacturing. Building on this initiative, New York created the Office of Strategic Workforce Development in 2022 with a $350 million investment approved in the State's budget. This office now houses programs and initiatives divided across five focus areas: workforce development for people with disabilities, the educator workforce, public university students, working in the health care sector, and investment in seven target high-growth sectors.

New York also provides an example of a state that helps to cover tuition for credentials in high-demand fields. The New York Statewide Targeted Tuition Benefits Program provides tuition vouchers to state employees entering high demand for skilled professionals in four career fields: Commercial Driver's License (CDL), Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC), Nursing (LPN and RN programs only), and Welding. When enrolling in one of these training programs, participants can choose from over 140 education providers that accept tuition vouchers, or attend another accredited school and receive reimbursement. Participants can receive up to $2,500 in additional tuition benefits - on top of the standard $5,000 - for a total of up to $7,500 per program year.[61] Examples from other states include the Kentucky Work Ready Scholarship Program that provides tuition assistance for adults pursuing an industry recognized certificate, an associate's degree in applied science, or a diploma at participating postsecondary institutions and the West Virginia Invests Grant Program that covers tuition to any state community and technical college for a certificate or associate's degree in an in-demand, high-paying field.

C. Ohio

Similarly, Ohio's Office of Workforce Transformation works across government agencies to direct and administer state workforce development programs that focus on information technology and traditional careers. For example:

- The Individual Microcredential Assistance Program (IMAP) program reimburses individuals for approved *microcredential courses* in technology-related fields. The microcredential programs take less than a year to complete and confer mastery in a specific skill or set of skills in a technology field.
- The TechCred program provides reimbursements of up to $2,000 per credential for short-term, technology-focused training, with employers eligible for up to $30,000 per round and $180,000 annually. TechCred enables businesses of all sizes to quickly train both current and prospective workers in skills aligned with evolving industry needs.[62]

[60] Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2026, July). State models for effective workforce development [Policy brief].
[61] New York's Statewide Targeted Tuition Benefits Program is a joint labor-management program funded through collective bargaining agreements between New York State and the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA). It provides career advisement, tuition benefits, and professional development courses to state employees.
[62] Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2026, July). State models for effective workforce development [Policy brief].

- The Industry Sector Partnerships Grant provides funding to train workers through partnerships between private-sector firms and public or nonprofit workforce entities. The partnership must include at least two private-sector firms within the same industry and two workforce entities, which could include, for example, *community colleges and other educational nonprofit organizations*.

A single round of funding for the TechCred program in Ohio awarded nearly $14 million to support over 10,500 credentials across 833 employers.[63] Further, a total of $17.6 million in 64 Industry Sector Partnerships has been awarded since 2019, with the fifth round of the program awarding 35 partners a total of $5.1 million in January 2025.[64]

D. Virginia

Launched in 2016 under the Virginia Community College System, the **FastForward program** funds short-term workforce training and equips adult learners with industry-recognized credentials in high demand fields such as healthcare, IT, skilled trades, and logistics, as defined by the state's workforce development board.

FastForward's funding model is a distinctive pay-for-performance framework that incentivizes credential completion and involves a shared financial commitment: upon enrollment, students pay for one-third of the cost of tuition and the remaining two-thirds are paid by the state at time of training completion (one-third) and workforce credential attainment (one-third). If the student fails to complete the program, then the student is required to pay this portion of the total program cost.

A study by MDRC found that FastForward programs had an "extremely high program completion rate and varied credential attainment at the individual program level. Most students were successful in transitioning into employment with increased quarterly earnings, although some of the entry-level jobs available did not pay premium wages."[65]

Earn and Learn Models: Registered Apprenticeships

Registered apprenticeships are an important pathway for adult learners to access postsecondary credentials, combining employment and classroom training with hands-on experience and mentorship. Registered apprenticeship have been found to improve employment and earnings, but the evidence base is small.[66] The empirical estimates of the employer return on investment to registered apprenticeships range from 40 to 90 percent; for each $1.00 invested in a registered apprenticeship, employers can expect to reap a benefit of $1.40 to $1.90 from their investments.[67]

Registered apprenticeship is an employment model that primarily uses three program designs – time based, competency-based, and hybrid programs – that align with adult learning and higher education frameworks. Most commonly, the time-based program requires 2,000 hours on-the-job training, with 144 hours of related technical instruction.

Apprenticeships frequently establish agreements between employers or organized labor and training providers for required instructional hours that lead to industry recognized credentials. Some states,

[63] *Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2026, July). State models for effective workforce development [Policy brief].*
[64] *Ohio Department of Development. (2026, February 3). New round of industry sector partnership grant funding now available [Press release].*
[65] *MDRC. (n.d.). Virginia Community College FastForward evaluation brief [Research brief].*
[66] *U.S. Department of Labor, CLEAR Initiative. (2024, October 31). Research synthesis: Apprenticeship and work-based learning [Synthesis report].*
[67] *U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Apprenticeship. (n.d.). The return on investment (ROI) to employers from registered apprenticeships [Report].*

including Ohio, have required postsecondary institution partnership in the instructional requirements for registered apprenticeships.[68]

Whereas other higher education institutions or systems are participating in apprenticeship readiness (or pre-apprenticeship) or embedding the apprenticeship model into degree programs:

- ApprenticeshipNH uses the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH) as the central intermediary that helps employers identify their skills, competencies, and workforce needs, supports curriculum development and related technical instruction and provides critical technical assistance to meet federal and state requirements.
- A recently published study by New America found that Degree Apprenticeships – "an emerging model of career preparation that integrates Registered Apprenticeship with an associate, bachelor's, or master's degree.." were being offered in nearly 350 institutions of higher education across 91 different occupations, with promising growth opportunities at the Associate Degree level.[69]

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[68] Other apprenticeship opportunities include Earn and Learn (Georgia), Ivy Tech's Apprenticeship Program (Indiana), Mississippi Apprenticeship Program, Montana Registered Apprenticeship, ApprenticeshipNH (New Hampshire) and Apprenticeship Carolina (South Carolina). Each requires varying levels of engagement from postsecondary institutions but requires them to be involved in related instruction of apprentices. Education Commission of the States (ECS). (n.d.). Where do apprenticeships and higher ed meet?

[69] New America. (n.d.). Mapping the landscape of degree apprenticeship: Expanding a promising model for mobility [Insight report].