



## Near Completion: Framing the Issue

The success of America's economy depends on a dramatic increase in the number and diversity of those who complete college with a high-quality credential. Federal and state policymakers, as well as prominent philanthropic organizations, have contributed both intellectual and monetary capital to build momentum behind this ambitious goal.

Much of the effort has focused on increasing the number of students who are college ready, bolstering support for students who successfully access college, and equipping adults who seek new skills with pathways to quality degrees and credentials with labor market value. In this context, it is noteworthy that a sizeable population of adults, young and old, are already eligible to receive a postsecondary degree; yet, for a variety of reasons, many have left college without receiving it. Many others are a semester or less from satisfying their institution's degree requirements. These students have invested substantial resources—tangible and intangible—in seeking a college credential, either at the associate's or bachelor's levels, but have left within striking distance of that degree. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) refers to this phenomenon as *near completion*.

Near-completers have, by definition, already acquired most of the skills and knowledge represented by a college degree. In fact, they may have jobs and earnings that at least partially reflect their investment in higher education. But while human capital explains much of the payoff to education, credentials also make a difference. A college degree signals to employers that an individual has both the academic knowledge and the personal characteristics required to stay in school and to meet institutional expectations. Near-completers are losing out on the significant labor market advantages associated with college credentials, while

employers and society at large are losing out by not recognizing and taking advantage of all of the skills these individuals possess. Thus, transforming near-completers into college graduates would translate into a win for students, who realize long-term opportunities for economic and social benefit, as well as a win for institutions, policymakers, employers, and other stakeholders, all of which have a vital interest in increasing the number of graduates. In addition to increasing degrees for the near-completion population, the process of identifying near-completers and mitigating challenges adds to institutional learning and provides opportunities to make long-term changes to policies and practices that are getting in the way of student completion.

Leveraging our independent voice in higher education, IHEP seeks to elevate the issue of near completion and to outline ways in which institutions serving these students—as well as policymakers, researchers, and other education stakeholders—can reengage and graduate this population. This background paper for the National Summit on Near Completion discusses the scope and associated factors of near completion, as well as some initial efforts that may be promising in transforming near completion into degree attainment. The summit itself provides a forum for more in-depth discussions that can help shape a national agenda around the near-completion population.

## DEFINING NEAR COMPLETION

The challenge of reengaging students who have left college with some academic credit is not new. Many research and programmatic efforts are aimed at dropouts and returning adult learners, but they rarely focus specifically on students who earned almost enough credits to graduate before leaving school.<sup>1</sup> The near-completion population falls into two distinct groups of students:

- “Eligibles” are students who have accumulated the required number of credits, completed required courses, and hold a grade point average (GPA) above the minimum required for a degree, but have not been granted a degree. These students may not realize that they had crossed the degree qualification threshold within their program of study; they may qualify for a degree that is different from the one they were initially seeking; they may not have met residency requirements or nonacademic testing requirements; or their degree may have been withheld because of financial holds or incomplete paperwork.
- “Potentials” are students who need to earn a relatively low number of credits (for example, 15 or fewer) and/or need to fulfill specific course or competency requirements in order to qualify either for the degree they were seeking or for another, academically similar degree.

The two groups represent the low-hanging fruit in our national agenda to increase the number of college graduates. They provide a relatively untapped opportunity to bring a higher return on the investments that these students, and the colleges that served them, have already made in their postsecondary achievement. It is difficult to quantify the scope of these groups on a national scale, but there are several ways to roughly estimate the proportion of near-completers among the nation’s college student population.

One can identify the eligible students very broadly. For the traditional age cohort, nationally representative, longitudinal data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2000) suggest that almost 16 percent of students who graduated high school in 1992 and enrolled in college had earned more than 60 credits of postsecondary education

by 2000, but had not earned a degree and were no longer enrolled. This represents a substantial proportion of the traditional age cohort without a degree. Although the 60-credit mark is a common requirement for an associate’s degree, this calculation does not include other requirements for the degree, such as GPA or required general education courses (e.g., college-level math).

Similarly, we can roughly estimate the potentials. National data (National Center for Educational Statistics 2000) indicate that of those who earned no credential of any kind in the 1992–2000 period, almost 9 percent had attained at least 45 but fewer than 60 credits. This group consisted overwhelmingly of 1992 high school graduates, so those who entered higher education after the approximate age of 22 are not included; this is an important point to remember in assessing data connected with the completion enterprise.

It is more difficult to examine the group of students who entered college at a later stage in life. Recent longitudinal data look at first-time beginning students of all ages who entered college in 2003–04 (National Center for Educational Statistics 2009) and follow them until 2009. Although transcript data are currently not available, we can make a very rough assumption about students who enrolled for many months (whether full time or part time). For example, among those who last enrolled at a public two-year institution, about 30 percent had enrolled in college for 37 to 48 months but did not have a degree and were no longer enrolled, and about 10 percent for those enrolled 49 months or more. The proportion of possible eligibles is lower at four-year institutions, at about 5 percent for those enrolled 49 months or more. Better data will be available in the future, but for now, it seems that a small but significant proportion of adult students may have amassed enough credits to meet degree requirements but have not attained a degree.

Unfortunately, it is also difficult to characterize near-completers in terms of their demographics, attendance patterns, and other factors. Research suggests that students who leave school without earning a credential tend to have risk factors similar to nontraditional students as a whole, such as enrolling on a part-time basis or working full time. Dropouts also tend to come from lower-income

<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on degrees and do not include certificates.

backgrounds, are the first in their families to attend college, and attend certain types of institutions. However, much of this research targets all students, or those who drop out early in the college path. Very little is known about students who have accumulated a substantial number of credits before dropping out. Yet it stands to reason that such students are different from those who leave college in the first or second year of study (Eaton and Bean 1995).

Recent programmatic efforts to get former students back into college have focused on nontraditional, older students who have substantial credit accumulation but no degree, many of whom are attempting to return to college after several years. These adult returning students<sup>2</sup> may be financially independent and may already have a substantial work history, but recognize that they would be more competitive in the job market if they completed their respective degrees. Nonetheless, adults attempting to return to higher education later in life face some specific barriers, such as the age of their credits or the need to take a college-level math course.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps most important, we do not know much about why near-completers left without a degree in the first place. The next section briefly explores factors that might be associated with near completion, and offers a framework for understanding how key leverage points could be used to push near-completers toward degree attainment.

## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH NEAR COMPLETION

The literature addressing near completion remains underdeveloped both conceptually and empirically. Although near-completers have not been recognized as a unique and critical student population in the literature, research on

adult learners and other nontraditional student populations can be instructive.

As noted by Adelman (2006), most studies on student departure highlight attrition within the first two years of enrollment, without allowing for return after those years, and focus on attrition at the same institution (thereby not accounting for students who have enrolled at another institution). Moreover, although attrition among traditional undergraduate populations has been studied extensively, less is known about completion patterns among adult learners (Kasworm 1990; Kasworm and Pike 1994). Financial hardship, personal factors, self-perceptions, and institutional context have all been found to influence students' decisions to leave (Braxton 2000; Parkin and Baldwin 2009). In fact, personal and family reasons are prominent in students' decisions to leave college (Adelman 2006). These factors are often exacerbated for adult learners who juggle multiple conflicting roles: Student, worker, significant other, caregiver, and parent (Castles 2004). As a result, adults often have a limited amount of time to dedicate to their studies and are more likely to drop out of college regardless of academic achievement (Dennis, Calvillo, and Gonzalez 2008; Ponton, Derrick, and Carr 2005).

Another issue that comes up in prior literature is the lack of structures in place to reenroll students who have accumulated significant credits toward their degrees. Students who fit the near-completer profile generally take classes at several institutions (Watson 2010), and are more likely to be enrolled at two-year colleges (Seftor and Turner 2002), and to work full time and enroll part time (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning 2000). Given that nontraditional students are the most at risk for departure, reengaging near-completers or preventing departure in the first place requires focused efforts to recruit and retain these students (Watson 2010). Although strategies to recruit adult learners do not represent intentional efforts to recruit near-completers, the similarities between these two groups hint at how institutions have reached out to students who likely have accumulated some level of postsecondary credit. A recent article (Hoover 2009) highlighted strategies to recruit adult learners, such as developing a rating system on the likelihood of student enrollment, improving audit practices for dealing with adults, engaging the community in order

2 "Adult returning students" can be defined in a number of ways. For example, Department of Education data define students 24 years or older as financially independent, and the Census Bureau often focuses on the 25 and older population.

3 Of the 1992 high school graduates who enrolled in college, and did not have a credential but had 60 credits or more, 27 percent had not passed a college-level math course. This poses a serious issue when bringing people back to school, especially if they have been out of school for a while (National Center for Educational Statistics 2000).

to better understand the potential local market, contacting past applicants, and evaluating current services aimed at adult students.

Research also suggests that a need for alternative post-secondary pathways, such as work-based education and e-learning, to facilitate degree attainment for a student population that may have limited time, resources, and experience navigating higher education. For example, Voorhees and Lingenfelter (2003) suggest recognition of prior learning as one way for students to meet degree requirements. Prior experiential learning<sup>4</sup> has been defined as the accumulated learning from experience (e.g., training acquired through military service) where the individual's competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities) are gained through work-based or life experience. Such competencies can be assessed with instruments like the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) for certified and assigned college-level credit (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems 2008). Lester and Costley (2010) have developed a work-based pedagogy focused on learning, recognition of previous learning for credit, sound projects with appropriate learner support, and assessments of work-based criteria to represent relevant academic levels. Yet despite growing evidence that work-based programs are attracting adult learners into higher education (Hughes, Slack, and Baker 2006; O'Doherty 2006), there is limited empirical evidence on how this learning affects progression to degree, or how prior learning efforts can be used as a tool to assist near-completers.

Many studies have noted a need to better serve nontraditional students by changing institutional practices, providing interventions geared toward near-completers, and updating policies, including financial aid. College affordability is consistently cited as a factor that contributes to student departure. The research that supports these findings, however, focuses on attrition rates for traditional students within the first or second year of enrollment; few studies examine persistence beyond initial enrollment (DesJardins 2003). College affordability is often contingent on the financial aid

available to offset tuition costs for nontraditional students. Financial aid systems are often inadequate for part-time, working adults and students who repeatedly stop-out and reenroll (Castellano 2009). Research has also highlighted the influence of the composition of financial aid packages on students' decisions to enroll and persist (Heller 1997). Although every form of aid reduces the likelihood of first stop-out, grant aid is the most effective. Replacing loans with grant aid increases the probability of reenrollment, while shifting from gift aid to loans adversely affects low-income students who may benefit the most from financial aid (Cofer and Somers 2001; DesJardins and McCall 2010; Dowd and Coury 2006). Finally, unmet need has been shown to have a direct impact on persistence for adult learners, who appear to be more responsive to price than younger students (Bishop and Van Dyke 1977; Sandler 2001).

A final aspect of the near-completer phenomenon may lie in students' pathways to a four-year institution via community college. Given the substantial price differential between community colleges and four-year institutions, many students start at lower-priced institutions such as community colleges with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution. Some of these students amass substantial numbers of credits at the community college, but when they look at the price of attendance for a four-year institution they may feel "priced out" of a four-year degree. It may be that students do not have knowledge or have not considered whether financial aid from a four-year institution could help them make the transition possible. They may abandon their higher education goals altogether at this point without even looking at whether their academic credits are enough for an associate's degree. Such a situation is only made worse by state policy developments over the past several years that have contributed to increasing the costs of attending college, placing additional financial burdens on students and families.

## FRAMEWORK FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Research that directly addresses near completion is limited, but enough is known about nontraditional students such as adult learners, as well as students who leave without a degree, to start thinking about the factors associated with near completion. These factors could help identify policies and actions that could reengage near-completers in postsec-

4 Also called Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). See Adelman (2009, pp. 156–62) for a description of what many European countries are doing with APEL.

ondary education. Perhaps most important is that for many of these students, “life” is the overriding factor driving their withdrawal—they lose their job, face a health crisis, leave the area, start a family, or become a primary caregiver to older family members—all of which make staying in school an exceedingly difficult proposition. Such personal factors are difficult to quantify. Yet if policies can be shaped to account for the demands of life while making the demands of college reasonable, our nation will begin see the completion numbers we are seeking.

Other factors noted in the literature can contribute to our understanding of this issue. These factors, described below, can be loosely categorized as recruitment, assessment, affordability, and recognition of completion.

### **Recruitment: How to Reengage Students?**

Recruitment refers to the process institutions (or states, in the case of statewide campaigns) undertake to identify and reengage students who might be eligible for a degree or who need a few more credits to graduate. One component is broadly identifying such former students using criteria such as the number of credits they completed before departure. Institutions can also determine whether these students are currently reenrolled or have completed a degree program at another institution. This process seems straightforward, but it poses great challenges for many institutions. Because of high mobility and transfer rates of contemporary students, identification of reenrollment and subsequent degree completion often requires reliance on statewide data systems or a student enrollment and degree verification agency such as the National Student Clearinghouse. There are also a number of institutions, as well as for-profit enterprises, in the credit aggregation business—they recruit and advertise to populations such as former students who have attended multiple institutions and need to complete a degree, adult returning students, students in the military or veterans, and others with prior but incomplete experience. Such resources are costly and, given the current fiscal climate, many states are turning away from such opportunities for the simple lack of matching funds or human capital needed to keep such systems going.

Similar challenges occur once students are identified as eligible for a degree or are just short of degree attain-

ment—at this point, institutions must locate and contact the students. This is a difficult, costly, and time-consuming process that many individual institutions find impossible on their own. Once institutions locate the students, they must consider how to encourage eligible students to accept the degree and return for graduation (if interested) or, in the case of potentials, convince them to return to the institution to complete their degree. Once again, life challenges come into play, and it is unclear to what extent institutions are able to meet students where they are or to convince students of the value of their nearly completed credential.

The recruitment process raises a number of important questions. Do states and institutions have adequate data systems to identify former students who have reenrolled or completed degrees at other institutions? What state and federal resources are available to institutions to provide accurate student contact data? How do commercial vendors play into the process of contacting students? How can institutions and states partner with employers to increase the value of the associate’s and bachelor’s degrees? How can institutions showcase campus services, such as extended hours or one-stop-shop student services, that support near-completers’ situations?

### **Assessment: What Have Students Learned?**

In the context of near completion, assessment refers both to (1) the process institutions undertake to determine who is eligible for a degree or needs a few more credits to graduate and (2) how institutions recognize credits and prior learning in order to get potentials over the degree threshold. States or institutions might identify former students who have amassed a certain number of credits but have not reenrolled or earned a degree, but they also need to make sure the students have satisfied academic requirements—often through degree audits or some other mechanism. This process looks at student transcript(s) to determine which students are actually eligible for a degree; for potentials, the next step is to consider pathways they can take to finish the degree. In addition to credits awarded at another institution subsequent to enrollment at the investigating institution, the student may bring work experience that can be captured through prior learning assessments and count toward the degree.

Questions to consider include these: Do institutions have adequate degree audit systems (often provided by commercial vendors) to identify eligibles and potentials? How are decisions made about the impact of curricular changes or new course requirements, such as freshman seminar and capstone requirements or even swim tests? For students who are just short of meeting requirements, can assessments of previous or work-based learning help close the completion gap? How do state agencies and institutions develop consistent prior learning standards and procedures? Who will assess previous or work-based learning? Do institutions have the capacity to assist potential students with the requirements for prior learning portfolios, or the faculty capacity to evaluate those portfolios? What is the maximum number of prior learning credits an institution will accept from a potential student?

### **Affordability: How to Reduce Financial Burden?**

Issues of affordability exist for most near-completers; however, the role of affordability is not as significant for eligibles as for potentials. For example, students who are eligible for a degree may have nonacademic financial holds on their records that prevent institutions from awarding a degree, such as parking fees, library fines, or fees for awarding the degree itself. These types of financial barriers might be easily resolved by institutions' waiving fees or removing financial barriers. For former students who just have a few credits to go, or academic requirements to meet, the issue of affordability centers more broadly on the financial burden of reenrollment and persistence. State financial aid, for example, might not be available for part-time students, or institutions may not have the resources to provide the financial literacy for students to make informed decisions.

Financial barriers give rise to a number of considerations. What role do state tuition and financial aid policies play? Should institutions change their financial policies in order to reduce or eliminate nonacademic degree holds? What financial supports can be offered to ease the financial burden of reenrollment? How can federal, state, and institutional policies support financial literacy training?

### **Recognition of Completion: Who Awards the Degree and How?**

At the most basic level, once eligibles or potentials have satisfied all requirements, the institution awards them a degree. In some cases, however, this is not as straightforward as it might seem. In the case of near-completers, complications may be caused by transfer and/or "swirl." An eligible student may not meet system or institutional requirements for credit accumulation at a single "home" institution, despite having accumulated enough credits across multiple institutions. Institutions may not have processes in place to formally award degrees to students who are not currently enrolled at the institution and have not been enrolled for several semesters. Eligible students may not want the degree for which they are eligible, such as a general studies degree, when they originally took courses toward a more specialized credential.

The issue of recognition raises many questions. Which agency can or should award degrees if no clear "home" institution exists? Are students required to request the degree or reenroll before a degree can be awarded? If an eligible student does not respond to degree award notices issued by an institution, are there other options to award the degree? Clearly a recognized degree can enhance labor force outcomes, so why do some students not apply for the degree in the first place?

### **Other Issues**

Using the lens of recruitment, assessment, affordability, and recognition of completion helps frame some of the issues that arise when trying to convert near-completers into degree holders. The questions raised may point to further research, new institutional practices, or state policies that can facilitate improvement. It is also important to recognize a number of issues prominent in higher education policy debates that cut across these categories, such as transfer and mobility, quality and assessment, demographics, and workforce and skills training.

- As noted above, issues of transfer and mobility come into play in different ways, whether by making it difficult to identify and contact former students, or by complicating the assessment of degree requirements

when near-completers have accumulated credits at multiple institutions. About 20 percent of students attend schools in more than one state, and 24 percent of community college transfers were interstate (National Center for Educational Statistics 2000).

- Quality and assessment issues within the context of near completion are particularly important during the process institutions undertake to determine degree eligibility. In determining eligibility through a degree audit, for example, institutions take into account past and current curricular requirements and academic performance measures such as GPA. In addition, quality plays a role in discussions about the credibility of a general studies degree, as well as the acceptance of credits from prior experiential learning.
- Both of these aspects of quality are related to the value of an awarded credential in the workplace, and whether the financial burden of completing the degree led to measurable benefits. Labor force issues are particularly relevant when one recognizes that demand for highly skilled workers has increased, and, despite current economic conditions, the importance of a degree in signaling competencies continues to rise.
- Meanwhile, demographic shifts will have an impact on who enrolls in college, as well as where they go. For example, projections of enrollment suggest that the students of the future will be more likely to come from low-income, minority, and immigrant backgrounds. Given that these groups are disproportionately likely to attend community colleges, the increased enrollment may put pressure on the capacity of these institutions to serve students. It is unclear how this will impact degree attainment, but it may change the characteristics of the near-completion population in future years.

### WORK RELATED TO NEAR COMPLETION

Attempts to address the issue of near completion are not new. For example, at the associate's level, San Diego Miramar focused on retroactive degree awards, and between 1999 and 2001 increased associate's degrees by almost 20 percent. However, a broader understanding and knowledge of near completion remains elusive for the reasons

already described. Still, a number of ongoing efforts are exploring various facets of the issue—such as awarding retroactive degrees, reengaging adult learners, and recruiting former students. As these projects progress, states and institutions will be able to share findings and illuminate promising practices and policies that can foster progress from near completion to degree attainment.

IHEP's **Project Win Win**, undertaken in partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and funded by Lumina Foundation for Education, comes at the issue from the perspective of helping institutions learn how to identify students who are eligible for an associate's degree or who are "academically short" and require only a few credits to graduate. The basic scenario for all participating institutions involves several steps:

- Identify students who earned at least 60 credits and the minimum GPA required for graduation, but who never received the associate's degree and had not been enrolled at the institution for at least a year;
- Match the initial list of students against state system records and/or the National Student Clearinghouse to determine who is either currently enrolled elsewhere or earned a degree from another institution, and remove them from the population under consideration;
- Subject each remaining student to a "degree audit" to reach a final determination on degree eligibility; and for all degree eligible students, determine whether there are any administrative holds on degrees and resolve as many of these as possible; and
- Find all those for whom the degree audit determined "academic shortfall" by nine or fewer credits and contact them with templates for finishing degrees that include formal class work, credit-by-examination, and/or development and review of a portfolio that documents and validates experiential learning.

This process takes two years to complete, with the largest portions of time spent on degree audits and locating the potential degree-completers.

The project is a major expansion of a pilot program conducted in 2009–10, in 9 of the 35 institutions and under the sponsorship of the Education Trust. Despite numerous challenges, by the end of their seven-month pilot, these institutions had already awarded or certified for award nearly 600 associate’s degrees, and had lined up almost 1,600 students who were short by nine or fewer credits, hence potential degree recipients. The pilot schools discovered that finding the students and awarding these degrees is neither simple nor quick. They encountered many challenges along the way, including problems with local or state data systems such as compatibility and changes in software; nonmembership in the National Student Clearinghouse; difficulty with or lack of degree audit software; lack of transcripts from other institutions; and difficulty locating students who are eligible for degrees or are academically short.

The first expansion of the project encompassed six states and 35 institutions. Of these, 23 institutions have identified more than 43,000 students of interest as of July 2011. Nineteen institutions completed either all or a significant part of degree audits for 13,500 students, reaching final classification for 9,000—2,000 eligible for an associate’s degree and 3,800 potential completers. Twelve of the 35 institutions in the first expansion will begin work in September 2011. In addition, the project will expand again with 20 community colleges from Florida and Oregon.

Another important initiative, **Non-Traditional No More**,<sup>5</sup> is hosted by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE). With funding from Lumina Foundation for Education, this initiative works with six states (Arkansas, Colorado, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, and South Dakota) to identify their “ready adult” population, defined as adults who are close to having enough credits to earn a degree but have not yet returned to college, and build pathways to help them return and earn degrees. Thus far, many barriers to reenrolling stop-outs have been identified in the areas of data, academic affairs, student services, financing/financial aid, and communications. Examples include financial holds on registration, lack of familiarity with recent changes in campus processes, financial aid concerns, and competing life obligations. Several of the institutions have responded by developing creative new ways to ad-

dress these barriers. Some examples include flexibility in addressing financial holds on registration through payment plans or waivers; offers of preliminary transcript evaluation; “concierge” or single-point-of-contact programs; extending student services beyond business hours; and offering a rigorous prior-learning assessment program (Fusch 2010; Michelau and Lane 2010).

In one of the participating states, South Dakota, the Board of Regents has focused attention on reenrolling students who have stopped out. Their initial work identified almost 2,000 students who had earned at least 90 credits and had left the university system in the past five years (Turman 2009; Fusch 2010). In response, the regents have enacted several significant policy changes to eliminate barriers to students reenrolling and completing their degrees.

WICHE also facilitates the **Adult College Completion Network**,<sup>6</sup> which aims to unite organizations and agencies working to increase college completion by adults with prior credits but no degree. They include a number of other projects funded by Lumina Foundation for Education, such as the following:

- A new higher education center for adults just opened as part of the **Graduate! Philadelphia** program, with nine area colleges participating (Sander 2008). The program hopes to bring back about 80,000 adult students who have completed at least one year of college but no degree. It provides in-person and online support to adults who want to return to college and complete their degrees, including assistance in finding a college, getting academic support, and filling out financial aid forms.
- **The HIRE (Higher Education Requires Education) Education Forum** in the Greater Louisville area has a Spring Fling event that targets students who did not finish a credential while enrolled as undergraduates. HIRE will partner with business leaders and the Mayor’s Education Roundtable to support more than 200,000 regional residents who have earned some college credits (BusinessWire 2010).

5 See <http://wiche.edu/ntnm>.

6 See <http://adultcollegecompletion.org/content/adult-college-completion-network>.



- Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system is creating a **RAPID Completion Program** to increase reenrollment and associate's or bachelor's degree completion among former students who did not earn degrees. They have identified about 160,000 students who have at least 15 college credits, and will target a variety of services to help these students complete their degrees (BusinessWire 2010; Voss 2010). They are conducting a statewide outreach campaign that will provide information on how students can complete degrees quickly.
- **Ivy Tech Community Colleges** are striving to reenroll former students who left with at least 45 credits and to help them complete associate's degrees and go on pursue bachelor's degrees at Indiana University's regional campuses (BusinessWire 2010).

In addition, the **Kentucky Adult Learner Initiative** seeks to align the state's postsecondary policies with the needs of adult learners. One focus of this initiative is adults who have some college but no degree. For example, the state has identified about 11,000 people who came within a course or two of earning a college degree but never did (Sander 2008). The immediate goal is to bring back those students through Project Graduate. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education also has identified more than 230,000 Kentucky residents age 25 to 40 who have attended a public postsecondary institution, still reside in the state, but are not currently enrolled in college. The council commissioned a survey and found that respondents were most interested in credit for prior learning, accelerated academic programming, and financial aid. Recommendations by the council include adult learner advocates on each campus, reevaluation of policies on credit for college-level experiential learning, transferability of credit for prior learning, strategies to improve financial aid applications, development of flexible degree programs, and coordination of college outreach strategies to reach adults, among others.

Other initiatives targeting adult learners are based at colleges and universities. For example, the University of New Mexico (UNM) has a decade-long **Graduation Project** that has been helping adult learners return to college and graduate. Beginning in 1996, the project targeted students

who left UNM in good standing, with more than 98 credit hours, to encourage them to return to the university and finish their degrees.<sup>7</sup> Benefits for returning students are a special, short re-admit application, priority enrollment, and a progress report of which courses are needed to graduate. More recently, the University of Utah recently started the **Returning to U** program, which includes offering scholarships to the state's 3,000 or so adults who have completed 90 or more credits (Sander 2008).

These types of initiatives are complemented by resources such as the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems' (NCHEMS) **Center for State Policy on Student Progression**,<sup>8</sup> which provides a central resource to help policymakers understand the complex patterns of students who flow into and out of higher education. The center conducts regular surveys on data resources and policies affecting student success, including adult degree completion efforts (Boecke, Zis, and Ewell 2011). For example, it found that 29 states administer grant programs to institutions or organizations directed at adult student success, while 16 states maintain student aid programs targeted specifically at adult students. The **Achieving the Dream** project is a national effort to help more community college students succeed. Research commissioned through the project has explored the extent of the "late stop-out" phenomenon, defined as students who accumulate at least 30 credits within the first two years but stop out without completing a credential or transferring (Topper 2009).

## NEXT STEPS IN THE NEAR-COMPLETION CONVERSATION

All the efforts described above are trying to move near-completers forward to degree attainment. However, they are generally in their early stages and are somewhat disconnected from each other. Over the next several years, much more research and programmatic work will be needed to uncover more useful information on near-completers—who they are, where they are, why they left college after amassing so many credits, and how to either award degrees or recruit former students back into college. Answering these questions will better inform policymakers and other stake-

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.unm.edu/graduationproject>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.nchems.org/c2sp/>.

holders about near completion and help them to craft and strengthen policy and practice.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy recognizes the importance of near completion in meeting the goal of improving postsecondary attainment and is working to elevate this issue nationally. The National Summit on Near Completion, convened by IHEP to bring together federal and state policymakers, as well as stakeholders from higher education organizations, colleges and universities, and various business sectors, who will define the challenges and opportunities of the near-completion phenomenon, outline questions still to be addressed, and identify ways in which higher education stakeholders can identify and support these students. These high-level discussions are key to developing a national agenda around this unique and important student population and are intended to act as a catalyst to increased efficiency in improving degree attainment while at the same time improving policy and practice.

## REFERENCES

- Adelman, C. 2006. *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Adelman, C. 2009. *The Bologna Process for U.S. Eyes: Re-learning Higher Education in the Age of Convergence*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Bishop, J., and J. Van Dyke. 1977. "Can Adults be Hooked on College? Some Determinants of Adult College Attendance." *Journal of Higher Education* 12 (1): 40–59.
- Boeke, M., S. Zis, and P. Ewell. 2011. *State Policies Affecting the "Adult Re-Entry Pipeline" in Postsecondary Education: Results of a Fifty-State Inventory*. Denver, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.
- Braxton, M. J., ed. 2000. *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- BusinessWire. 2010. Hoosiers with Some College Credits but No Degree to Receive New Help Through Lumina Foundation's Adult Degree Completion Commitment. News release. September 29.
- Castellano, M., and L. T. Overma. 2009. *Community College Access and Affordability for Occupational and Non-Traditional Students*. Louisville, KY: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, University of Louisville, June.
- Castles, J. 2004. "Persistence and the Adult Learner: Factors Affecting Persistence in Open University Students." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 5 (2): 166–79.
- Cofer, J., and P. Somers. 2001. "What Influences Student Persistence at Two-Year Colleges?" *Community College Review* 29 (3): 56–77.
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. 2000. *Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education*. Executive Summary. Chicago, IL: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. 2008. *Adult Learning in Focus*. Chicago, IL: CAEL.
- Dennis, J. M., E. Calvillo, and A. Gonzalez. 2008. "The Role of Psychosocial Variables in Understanding the Achievement and Retention of Transfer Students at an Ethnically Diverse Urban University." *Journal of College Student Development* 49 (6): 535–50.
- DesJardins, S. L. 2003. "Event History Methods: Conceptual Issues and an Application to Student Departure from College." In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, edited by J. C. Smart, Vol. 10, pp. 421–71. New York, NY: Agathon Press.
- DesJardins, S., and B. McCall. 2010. "Simulating the Effects of Financial Aid Packages on College Student Stopout, Reenrollment Spells, and Graduation Chances." *Review of Higher Education* 33 (4): 513–41.
- Dowd, A., and T. Coury. 2006. "The Effect of Loans on the Persistence and Attainment of Community College Students." *Research in Higher Education* 47, 33–62.
- Eaton, S., and J. P. Bean. 1995. "An Approach/Avoidance Behavioral Model of College Student Retention." *Research in Higher Education*, 36, 617-645.
- Fusch, D. 2010. "Re-enrolling Stop-Outs: Overcoming the Barriers." *Academic Impressions*. July 15.
- Heller, D. E. 1997. "Student Price Response in Higher Education: An update to Leslie and Brinkman." *Journal of Higher Education* 68 (6): 624–59.
- Hoover, E. 2009. "8 Strategies for Recruiting Adult Students to 4-Year Colleges." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 27).
- Hughes, J., K. Slack, and C. Baker. 2006. "Learning Journeys Research Project." Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Warwick, September 6–9.
- Kasworm, C. E. 1990. "Adult Undergraduates in Higher Education— A Review of Past Research Perspectives." *Review of Educational Research* 60 (3): 345–72.

- Kasworm, C. E., and G. R. Pike. 1994. "Adult Undergraduate Students—Evaluating the Appropriateness of a Traditional Model of Academic Performance." *Research in Higher Education* 35 (6): 689–710.
- Lester, S., and C. Costley. 2010. "Work-Based Learning at Higher Education Level: Value, Practice and Critique." *Studies in Higher Education* 35 (5): 561–75.
- Michelau, D., and P. Lane. 2010. *Bringing Adults Back to College: Designing and Implementing a Statewide Concierge Model*. Denver, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, November.
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2000. *National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988*. Data Analysis System. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2009. *Beginning Post-secondary Students 2004/09*. Data Analysis System. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- O'Doherty, E. 2006. "Foundation Degrees and Widening Participation: Public Sector Employees' Work-Based Learning and Foundation Degrees." *Journal of Access Policy and Practice* 3 (2): 142–61.
- Parkin, A., and N. Baldwin. 2009. *Persistence in Post-Secondary Education in Canada: The Latest Research*. Research Note #8. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Ponton, M. K., M. G. Derrick, and P. B. Carr. 2005. "The Relationship Between Resourcefulness and Persistence in Adult Autonomous Learning." *Adult Education Quarterly* 55 (2): 116–28.
- Sander, L. 2008. "Colleges Woo Adults Who Have Some Credits but No Degree." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54 (23): 29.
- Sandler, M. 2001. "Perceived Stress and an Elaborated Structural Model of Adult Student Persistence: An Examination of Financial Aid, Financial Satisfaction, Intent to Persist and Persistence." Presentation at the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Wa., April 10–14.
- Seftor, N., and S. Turner. 2002. "Back to School Federal Student Aid Policy and Adult College Enrollment." *Journal of Human Resources* 37 (2): 337–52.
- Topper, A. 2009. "Late Stop-Outs." *Data Notes: Keeping Informed about Achieving the Dream Data*. Vol. 4 (No. 5) (September/October 2009). Available at: <http://www.achievingthedream.org/Portal/Modules/d51d0e5f-7ca9-410b-b8e6-3243306a04f3.asset?>
- Turman, P. 2009. "South Dakota Ready Adult Profiles: Factors that Influence Ready Adult Departure." Presentation at the WICHE State Leader Meeting, Denver, CO, September 16-17.
- Voorhees, R. A., and P. E. Lingenfelter. 2003. *Adult Learners and State Policy*. Denver, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers.
- Voss, M. 2010. Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Awarded Grant to Encourage Former Student to Reenroll and Earn Degrees. MSCU News release, September 29. Available at: <http://www.mnscu.edu/media/newsreleases/current/article.php?id=174>.
- Watson, J. 2010. "The Hunt for Adult Learners." *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* 27 (18) (October 14): 14.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is an independent, nonprofit organization that is dedicated to access and success in postsecondary education around the world. Established in 1993, the Washington, D.C.-based organization uses unique research and innovative programs to inform key decision makers who shape public policy and support economic and social development. IHEP's Web site, [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org), features an expansive collection of higher education information available free of charge and provides access to some of the most respected professionals in the fields of public policy and research.



**INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY**  
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20036

202 861 8223 **TELEPHONE**  
202 861 9307 **FACSIMILE**  
[www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org) **WEB**