2023 State Policy Playbook

Executive Summary

The Western Governors University 2023 State Policy Playbook highlights specific barriers that impact working adult learners, with a focus on adults in low-income, low-resiliency jobs, who are referred to as rising and stranded talent. This playbook offers recommendations for policymakers and provides examples of existing policies that help working adult learners succeed.

Western Governors University believes that higher education should be:

Accessible

Accommodating

Achievable

Affordable

Applicable

These value propositions guide the policy recommendations in this playbook. These recommendations are designed around the unique post-secondary educational journey of the working adult learner. Each proposition is tailored to the distinctive policy needs of working adult learners so that, regardless of the realities learners face, states can tailor affordable and flexible options that provide rising and stranded talent with the opportunity to succeed and prepare them to meet current and future workforce demands. Policymakers can use these recommendations to ensure that working adult learners have accessible, accommodating, achievable, affordable, and applicable pathways to higher education.

Introduction

WGU is unique in that, from the onset, it was designed to primarily serve working adult learners and was built with the needs of those learners in mind. Four out of five WGU students work while enrolled, and their average age is 37.3. They come to WGU seeking a path to opportunity that can fit in their lives, that can meet them where they are, that allows them to leverage their experience and move quickly when possible, and that will enable them to thrive—financially and otherwise.

Research indicates that adults enroll or re-enroll in postsecondary education to improve their socioeconomic circumstances. Motivations reported by working adult learners include seeking a career change, advancing in their current career, needing to update their skills, or desiring personal improvement.[1] Working adult learners are often married or divorced, and many have children at home. As a result, they face multiple competing demands when working to obtain higher education credentials, such as work schedules and course attendance.[2] Affordability is also a concern, as working adult learners must incorporate educational costs into their existing budgets, which include crucial expenses like housing, food, and health care.

Two segments of working adult learners—rising talent and stranded talent—have additional challenges that create barriers to success. Individuals in both groups primarily work in low-income positions with little job security. In addition, individuals in these groups may face difficulties such as disability, single parenthood, prior incarceration, or homelessness. Despite their hardships, these groups of working adult learners have unlimited potential for achievement if provided with fitting postsecondary pathways.

In addition to sharing the struggles of all working adult learners, rising and stranded talent may experience other barriers to education and training. These barriers may include the following:

- Low digital literacy and limited access to computers and high-speed internet
- Restricted physical access to educational institutions and training programs
- Unfamiliarity with college resources, support, and processes
- Lack of college preparation
- Lack of relevant skills for upskilling and reskilling
- Uncertainty of postsecondary education's return on investment

Often, these barriers exist because institutions fail to provide targeted opportunities to the populations of rising and stranded talent.

While many opportunities abound for individuals in the rising talent group, they frequently need more resources and experience to take advantage of them. They do not have college degrees and often work in hourly positions. They seek new paths to opportunity but need more work experience in their fields of interest. Some rising talent individuals are

Learner Profile

Nam Clark

Virginia
M.A. Teaching, Social Science

After working in the restaurant industry for over a decade, Nam decided to switch careers. His positive experiences teaching English abroad motivated him to pursue a graduate degree in teaching, and he found that he thrived in the classroom. Upon graduation, Nam was offered a competitive full-time position to teach English as a second language at a diverse middle school.

academically ready for college, while others will require additional preparation before enrollment. A study by the Brookings Institute estimates that more than 30 million working adults would be classified as rising talent.[3]

James is an example of rising talent. He works as a custodian at his local elementary school, where teachers have noticed his positive interactions with students. These teachers have encouraged James to pursue an educational career, and he is interested in following this pathway. However, James has never attended college and is unsure how and where to start. He is also a single parent to two young children and does not believe he can afford college tuition.

Like rising talent, the approximately 10 million[4] working adults in the stranded talent group work in low-income, low-resiliency positions. Although they have completed a college degree, they are cut off from opportunities to progress. They either work in jobs that do not require college degrees or are employed in low-paying jobs within their field of study. They have the motivation and desire to succeed, but they are stuck. They need new skill sets and additional resources to help them move forward.

Linda, an example of stranded talent, has a bachelor's degree in dance. She thrived as a performer until she was disabled in a car accident. Unable to find a job in her field of study, she now works as an entry-level billing associate for a healthcare company. Linda desires promotion within the organization, but she lacks the necessary skills. She has considered re-enrolling in college for a business certification or a second degree but worries about finding time to study, attend classes, and continue working. Because she uses a wheelchair, Linda is unsure of the physical accommodations she will need to attend college.

The possibilities and promises of higher education have not benefited James, Linda, and countless other working adult learners. However, given the proper support and direction, the opportunities for growth that college provides can be available to them. Policymakers can help ensure systems are designed to adapt to learners' needs so that no matter the realities they face, they have affordable options that allow them to succeed. All working adult learners, including rising and stranded talent, can benefit from policies that make education more accessible, accommodating, achievable, affordable, and applicable.

Higher Education Should Be Accessible

Policymakers can support policies that improve access to postsecondary education by removing technological and institutional barriers for working adult learners.

Online education continues to grow in popularity, even as overall college enrollment declines.[5] The online format is particularly attractive to working adult learners, rural learners, and people in education deserts, who are drawn to the flexibility and accessibility of online learning.[6] Although online learning can remove common obstacles to college education, barriers still exist. Removing these barriers will help ensure that online education, the only workable option for many potential students, can be more affordable, accessible, and adaptable.

Working adult learners, specifically rising and stranded talent, invest a high percentage of their time and finances for their postsecondary education. Because of this, any barriers they encounter—no matter how small—may prove to be the tipping point for them to stop out or drop out. Because of this, higher education institutions and policymakers have an obligation to identify and remove technological and institutional structures that currently block learners from their path to success.

To thrive in online education, working adult learners must have the proper connections, equipment, and digital skills. Policymakers can propose that the costs of online learning (such as internet connectivity and equipment access) be eligible for financial aid or other student supports. Institutions and educational systems can partner with private corporations or public entities to make access to online learning more available and affordable. In addition, policies and programs that provide digital literacy support and training can help working adult learners succeed.

Technological Barriers

In today's environment, high-speed internet service is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity. Quality, high-speed internet service is necessary for Americans to do their jobs, participate equally in education, and stay connected. Online access is crucial for working adult learners in rural areas and education deserts, where access to a physical college campus is limited or nonexistent. More than 41 million adults, or 17.6% of the adult population, "live more than 25 miles from a broad-access public university."[7]

Learner Profile

Kevin Ninkovich

Washington
B.S. Business Administration
Healthcare Management

Kevin left college two semesters short of graduating and fell into the service industry as a bartender. After the pandemic shut down his employment in San Francisco, Kevin enrolled at WGU in healthcare management. Although he had positive experiences at two previous higher education institutions, it took finding WGU for him to finally complete his degree. He now works as a project manager for a large software development company.

Cost and access also compound the challenges of living in an education desert. As many as 47 million Americans do not have access to high-speed internet.[8] This means that only half of the homes in the continental United States have download speeds of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) or higher, which is the baseline for broadband. About one-third of households have access to speeds of less than 5 Mbps, and 15% have no internet access at all.[9]

The cost of internet access can also prove burdensome. Among 35 countries studied, the United States has the second-highest broadband costs.[10] Many families go without high-speed internet because of the price, and some may cut back on other essentials to make their monthly internet service payments. In addition, rural communities are not only less connected but also have a higher price sensitivity for technology products.

Broadband access is critical in closing equity gaps in educational attainment for students with low socioeconomic status and for individuals of color. The Pew Research Center reported that 33% of Hispanic adults and 31% of Black adults do not have a broadband connection at home, as opposed to 20% of white adults.[11] With the proliferation of high-quality online options for postsecondary education, the continued lack of access for individuals to basic broadband service can be the lone barrier to a student's education, career, and overall well-being.

Institutional Barriers

Higher education institutions can unintentionally hamper their learners from completion by creating both academic and nonacademic barriers.[12]

- Academic: Missing course requirements, missing institutional requirements, general academic challenges
- Nonacademic: Financial holds, incomplete paperwork, missing learner consent

Many institutional requirements are not clearly communicated to students,[13] and 90% of 281 postsecondary institutions agreed that their academic operations led to student barriers in some way.

It is important to note that some academic barriers disproportionately affect students of color and Pell-eligible learners.[14] Policies designed to clear the path would better serve learners to continue their education and understand the institutional requirements necessary to graduate.

Policy Recommendations in Action

Remove institutional barriers.

Louisiana HB 676 prohibits institutions from refusing to provide a transcript because a student owes a debt. Institutions also cannot withhold services or prevent course registration if a student is in default on a federal loan.[15]

Reduce financial barriers for working adult learners.

Ohio's Second Chance Grant reduces financial barriers preventing Ohioans with some college credit but no bachelor's degree from returning to higher education.[16] Reconnect programs in states like **Michigan**[17] and **Tennessee**[18] help adults return to higher education by providing a last-dollar grant that pays the remaining balance of tuition and fees after other state and federal financial aid have been applied.

Utilize the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).

States may supplement the ACP, which provides a subsidy of up to $30/month for low-income families (or up to $75/month for low-income families on Tribal Lands) to use toward the internet service plan offered by participating internet service providers, as well as a one-time $100 discount for a desktop, laptop, or tablet computer.[19] Twenty leading internet providers have committed to offering a $30 monthly plan to eligible households, so that families who apply their discounts to these plans will pay nothing for internet access.[20] However, only a quarter of eligible households have accessed this discount.[21]

WGU in Action

WGU partnered with the National Governors Association to host an in-person summit, roundtable discussion, and workshop on using Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Action Plans and Digital Equity Plans under the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA) to advance broadband access and digital skills in America's workforce. This partnership resulted in the whitepaper publication on Governor Strategies to Expand Affordable Broadband Access. In 2021, WGU awarded $770,644 through the Online Access Scholarship to provide internet, laptops, and webcams to 1,053 students.

Higher Education Should Be Accommodating

Policymakers can allocate funding for wraparound support services to accommodate educational success for working adult learners.

Working adult learners have different needs than traditional-aged students, and institutions can accommodate these learners by offering flexible, dynamic, and diverse services. Because working adult learners often manage multiple competing priorities, education and training programs must provide flexibility in accommodating students' schedules and family obligations while maximizing prior learning and providing a potentially shortened time to a degree at a lower cost.

Working adult learners are often caretakers and full- or part-time employees. They are also frequently unfamiliar with academic settings after pausing their studies. Because of these additional life circumstances, policymakers can advocate for wraparound support services that address academic and nonacademic needs, which can be extremely valuable for working adult learners.[22]

For example, a parent working minimum wage would need to work about 52 hours per week to afford both childcare and tuition at a four-year public institution.[23] This is an untenable workload; working adult learners say the main reason they have some college but no degree is that they could not balance the demands of both work and school.[24] State policies that support caretakers with financial aid beyond tuition can help alleviate the many demands on their time.

Working adult learners from diverse communities can also benefit from one-on-one support services. Because white learners are 2.5 times more likely to graduate from a public college than Black learners and 60% more likely than Latino learners,[25] policies designed to support the whole learner inside and outside their academic studies are essential in closing educational achievement gaps.

Learner Profile

Rosa Ballenilla Mateo

New York
B.A. Educational Studies

At the age of five, Rosa emigrated from the Dominican Republic with her family and faced challenges including learning a new language and a new culture.

Rosa uses her own experience as an immigrant to help others find their way. Her commitment to helping kids enter a path to success in education is her greatest strength. Rosa earned her bachelor's degree in educational studies in elementary education from WGU in 2022.

Policy Recommendations in Action

Develop policies to increase wraparound support.

States can help learners access federal funds such as the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program, which allowed 287 institutions to establish childcare programs in 2020.[26] **Oregon** HB 2835 requires select state institutions to hire staff members who can help eliminate bureaucratic barriers to accessing financial benefits.[27]

Support emergency financial aid programs.

Almost two-thirds of community college students cannot cover unexpected expenses over $500.[28] **Wisconsin** §36.66 distributes state-appropriated emergency funds of up to two $500 grants to eligible students for financial emergencies.[29] **Minnesota** HF 7 allocates funds to assist students with immediate needs that may become barriers to completion, including emergency housing, food, and transportation.[30]

Increase resource visibility.

Minnesota HF 7 requires community and technical colleges across the state to maintain a webpage detailing the basic needs resources available at the college and university, including contact information for each.[31]

WGU in Action

WGU has partnerships with 615 colleges throughout the United States and has implemented 7,921 transfer pathways. As a result, college graduates can access generous transfer privileges by being awarded transfer credit if their institution is recognized as nationally or regionally accredited by the U.S. Department of Education.

WGU also offers a free transcript service to help students gather and submit transcripts and grants additional credits on a course-by-course basis.

Higher Education Should Be Achievable

Policymakers can help working adult learners achieve by opening channels to competency-based education and quality short-term training programs.

Students at traditional universities are often held to a cadence of coursework guided by semesters, increasing the time and cost of completion rather than allowing learners to progress at their own pace. This particularly disadvantages working adult learners, for whom time is at a premium. Flexible learning modalities, such as short-term programs and competency-based education (CBE), help working adult learners move through education more rapidly.

Short-Term Learning

The popularity of short-term learning has exploded in the 21st century, with more than 500,000 credentials earned in 2018 alone.[32] Generally, these programs grant credit or noncredit certificates or credentials in less than one year. They can be especially attractive to rising and stranded talent, who may lack the time or financial resources to complete a bachelor's degree. Stranded talent, who already have college degrees, may seek short-term certification to reskill or upskill without starting a completely new program.

While short-term programs are abundant, program outcomes are mixed. Existing studies find that some short-term programs are more beneficial than others and that some groups of learners earn higher incomes and find greater career success.[33] Suggestions for improving the success rates of short-term programs include engaging local employers in curriculum development, incorporating workforce experience into programs, and prioritizing programs that align with in-demand jobs.[34] Credentials should also be stackable (built into other degree requirements) and portable (recognized at other institutions and in other states).[35] Policymakers need to create pathways that bring educators and employers

Learner Profile

Jillene VanNostrand

Maryland
B.S. Cybersecurity and Information Assurance
MBA Information Technology Management

While studying Arabic as a linguist in the U.S. Army, Jillene developed a love for protecting others and learning. After 18 years as a stay-at-home mom to five children, she enrolled at WGU, where she applied her skills, passions, and life experience.

It only took Jillene nine months to earn her bachelor's degree, and she recently received an MBA in Information Technology Management. As a participant in the Cybersecurity Talent Initiative, Jillene is currently employed in a two-year job placement with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

WGU's competency-based program allowed Jillene to move at her own speed, and she attained short-term industry certifications while receiving her degrees. "The ability to customize my pace, and that flexibility that WGU offers has been really instrumental in my success," she said.

together to develop programs that have the most potential to improve lives.

Short-term programs are often seen as an affordable alternative to degree-length programs. However, students enrolled in programs less than 15 weeks long are currently ineligible for Pell Grants.[36] This means that Pell funding will not cover tuition or other associated costs, such as tools, transportation, and fees.[37] Policymakers should improve affordability by developing other funding options for short-term funding, such as state funds and privately funded scholarships and grants. States and counties should also reevaluate their guidelines for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to ensure that these funds can support all eligible students in programs that lead to resilient career opportunities. Policymakers should also support federal legislation expanding Pell Grant eligibility to include short-term skills and job training.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE) measures skills and learning rather than time spent in a classroom. Working adult learners can progress through courses as soon as they can prove they've mastered the material rather than advancing only when the semester or term ends. If a student can learn faster, spend more time on schoolwork, or lean on the knowledge they already have from previous work or school experience, they can accelerate through their courses.

Through this educational model, working adult learners can apply their life and college experiences to benefit them in their postsecondary journey. Policies that acknowledge competencies and knowledge already gained can save learners time and money.

This flexibility of CBE—with floating start and end dates and learners moving at the pace that works for them—makes it particularly advantageous to those balancing education with other priories. However, that same flexibility means that CBE is frequently misunderstood and disadvantaged by outdated laws and institutional practices that focus on time instead of skills.

For example, increased credit articulation agreements and other public policy levers extending digitally across state lines can help learners gain and retain relevant credit for their time, effort, and cost. Many states have adopted laws and policies that require statewide transferability of lower-division courses and guaranteed transfer of associate degrees among public institutions within the state.

Policy Recommendations in Action

Improve the affordability of short-term programs by offering aid and scholarships.

Funding for higher education often focuses on programs that terminate with a degree. However, short-term programs can propel students toward career success or a future degree. Policymakers should expand state aid funding to include these programs.

- **Delaware**'s Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) Scholarship was expanded to include adult learners and students receiving workforce training certificates. The SEED+ program offers free tuition to students in "credit and non-credit programs leading to the award of a recognized academic credential or associate degree," including short-term certificates.[38]
- **Tennessee** designed a competency-based training program that provides upskilling opportunities for direct care staff in healthcare with valuable short-term credentials embedded. The Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect Funds help keep costs low for working adult learners.[39]

Develop quality short-term programs that provide training for in-demand professions.

FastForward is hosted through **Virginia**'s community colleges and offers short-term certifications and credentials in 40 high-demand industries. Since its inception in 2016, more than 32,700 credentials have been awarded, and learners have increased their take-home pay by an average of 55%.[40]

Improve credential portability and transparency.

Credential Engine is a nonprofit organization focused on creating "a transparent credential marketplace" that benefits individuals seeking credentials, institutions providing credentials, and decision-makers crafting policies for credential development.[41] Credential Engine has worked with 29 states, two regions, and several nonprofit organizations to increase credential transparency nationwide.[42] One of Credential Engine's collaborators is the Open Skills Network (OSN), which partners with WGU in developing and sharing skills libraries that can be used when creating quality credentials.

Improve transfer pathways for competency-based education.

At least 31 states have policies requiring a transferable core of lower-division courses and statewide guaranteed transfer of an associate degree.[43] Still, not all states have statewide participation in their articulation or transfer policies, and even fewer have been enacted for competency-based education. In 2022, **Louisiana** SB 261 was one of the first to develop statewide transfer agreements for competency-based and prior learning assessments.[44]

WGU in Action

WGU has provided general education courses through competency-based education for 18 years. We pioneered CBE to help working adult learners earn a degree to reach their career goals. We remain the only institution offering competency-based degrees at scale, creating a model other colleges and universities are increasingly striving to replicate. Learners progress through courses as soon as they can prove they've mastered the material, rather than advancing only when the semester or term ends. If a student can learn faster, spend more time on schoolwork, or lean on the knowledge they already have from previous work or school experience, they can accelerate through their courses. With 24/7 access to online learning resources, students embark on a learning journey tailored exactly to where their knowledge currently is—and where it needs to be.

Higher Education Should Be Affordable

Policymakers should tailor state aid programs to increase post-secondary educational affordability for working adult learners.

Affordability is crucial for working adult learners seeking higher education, including rising and stranded talent. Many of these individuals work in low-to-moderate-income positions and lack the personal funds to pay for college fully. Tuition is a significant expense, but it is just one of many college-related costs. Working adult learners must consider books, fees, and other course expenses. They must also balance college costs with their other expenses, including housing, food, childcare, and transportation. Student loans are often used to pay for these costs of living. Because of their obligations to work and family, these individuals can seldom attend college full-time, and they may have to cut back on work while in school. Working adult learners who are also parents "are likely to experience a reduction in earnings while in college, which can leave their families in dire straits."[45]

Grants, scholarships, and other aid forms can be critical to the initial enrollment and ongoing educational success of working adult learners. Unfortunately, many state aid programs fail to address their needs, focusing instead on recent high-school graduates and full-time students. A 2018 report from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) found that "of 100 of the largest state financial aid programs … 48 are merit-based, 26 link eligibility to a high school graduation date, 30 require full-time enrollment, [and] 19 exclude two-year institutions."[46] Although additional state aid programs that include working adult learners have been introduced since this report's publication, more must be done to support and include all learners. The ECS report further states, "State financial aid should not privilege certain postsecondary delivery models or enrollment intensities; rather, it should be adaptable and broadly inclusive."[47]

To make college more affordable, policymakers should revise state financial aid criteria to include more learners, such as part-time and adult students. This aid can be incorporated into existing programs, or states can create opportunities focusing on less-traditional students. State financial aid should also support course modalities and methods often utilized by working adult learners, such as online learning, competency-based education, and short-term credentials.

Learner Profile

Damien Mills

Washington
B.A. Special Education

Damien's original career path began with an associate degree in video production since he dreamed of creating magic behind the camera and producing inspirational videos. But an oversaturated market and the 2008 recession led him to begin a para-educator job at a local middle school.

Working one-on-one with students, Damien found his true gift: an ability to relate to and shape the lives of this generation, one smile at a time. One of the things that makes it so easy for Damien to relate to his students is that he has learning disabilities, too.

After depleting federal funds, WGU scholarships helped him bridge his financial gap. His perseverance paid off, and Damien is now a fully certified special education teacher.

Policy Recommendations in Action

Create or expand financial aid opportunities for working adult learners.

State financial aid is often available only to "traditional" aged, first-time, full-time students at specific types of institutions (such as institutions with a state-based physical location). Working adult learners also deserve state support to pursue education at universities that best meet their needs in programs relevant to their careers that prepare them for the workforce. Policymakers should be aware that aid for working adult learners may need to cover costs beyond tuition and fees, such as living expenses like food, transportation, and housing.

- **Iowa**'s Future-Ready Last-Dollar Scholarship covers the gaps between grants, scholarships, tuition, and qualified fees for learners who enroll at least part-time in a qualified program of study and apply for all available state and federal support.[48]
- In 2022, the **Wyoming** Legislature created Wyoming's Tomorrow scholarship program. This program provides scholarships for unmet financial need to Wyoming residents who are at least 24 years old and pursuing a degree or certificate.[49]
- **Indiana**'s Adult Student Grant provides $2,000 grants for tuition and fees to "working adults starting or completing an associate degree, bachelor's degree or certificate." Students need to be enrolled in at least six credit hours per academic term to be eligible.[50]
- **Tennessee**'s Nontraditional HOPE Scholarship is funded from state lottery proceeds. Students must be 25 or older, complete a FAFSA application, be enrolled at an eligible four-year institution, have a cumulative GPA of 2.75 or equivalent for one semester before applying, and have an adjusted gross income of less than $36,000.[51]

WGU in Action

WGU and the **Utah** System of Higher Education (USHE) worked collaboratively on the Adult Learners Grant Program, a bill adopted in 2021 by the Utah Legislature to establish a scholarship program to assist eligible adult learners who enroll in entirely online programs in fields with industry needs.[52]

Higher Education Should Be Applicable

Policymakers can support alignment between employers and higher education systems to ensure that credentials and degrees are applicable to state workforce needs.

According to a recent report, "57% of U.S. employees are either actively seeking or open to a new job."[53] However, the number of available positions currently exceeds the number of unemployed Americans.[54] A 2019 study estimates that by 2029, the United States could face a shortage of about 765,000 workers needing some college and about 8.6 million workers needing at least a bachelor's degree.[55] Another study predicts that the United States could lose about $1.7 trillion in revenue by 2030 due to labor shortages.[56]

This workforce gap cannot be filled by traditional students alone. Due to a drop in birth rates after the Great Recession, it is expected that the college-age population in the United States will decrease by approximately 15% between 2025 and 2029, with additional decreases in the following years.[57] Working adult learners are uniquely positioned to fill the workforce gap because many of them desire career advancement and need further training.[58] While taking postsecondary courses is an important step, it is not enough. A recent report on working adult learners states, "A higher education experience that doesn't help working adult students achieve better alignment with their career goals isn't serving them."[59]

To ensure that all learners are prepared for current and future job markets, policymakers must support efforts that align educational offerings with workforce needs. Successful programs for working adult learners, particularly rising and stranded talent, embed career connections into each step of the learning process.[60] In-demand and job-specific skills are integrated into all courses, internships and apprenticeships give students hands-on training, and out-of-class support and resources are easily accessible. In addition, program elements are developed in tandem with employers and industry representatives who understand the skills and experiences needed in the workforce.

Learner Profile

Antonesha Lewis

Oklahoma
B.S. Nursing

Antonesha is a pediatric registered nurse. As a single mother, she knew that 43% of single mothers drop out of college, and only 31% of single mothers ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree. She beat those odds while also working two jobs, and she chose nursing because her daughter has epilepsy. An advocate for healthy families and higher education, Antonesha earned her B.S. in nursing from Western Governors University in 2021.

Policy Recommendations in Action

Create standard skills definitions that align with workforce needs.

Established in 2020, the Open Skills Network (OSN) is a partnership of employers, educational institutions, and technology providers.[61] OSN is creating a library of skills definitions that can help align educational offerings with workforce needs. Western Governors University (WGU), a partner in the OSN, has released 16 skills library collections.[62]

Develop public and private partnerships to increase workforce opportunities.

Building partnerships and designating funding to build and scale solutions for in-demand and highly needed programs is key to meeting individuals' employment needs and a state's workforce goals. Working adult learners need access to quick, efficient, high-quality workforce solutions, especially in newer, quickly changing occupations and future-facing careers. WGU can be a partner in these efforts.

- Idaho Launch is an online career and training research hub that addresses workforce issues.[63] Idaho Launch also offers training funds for Idahoans who intend to work in **Idaho**, covering about 75–100% of training costs.[64]
- **Missouri**'s Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant addresses workforce needs by encouraging adults to pursue certificates, degrees, or industry-recognized credentials in high-need areas.[65]
- **New Mexico**'s Grow Your Own Teachers program offers scholarships and a pathway for school employees to become fully licensed classroom teachers.[66]

Expand apprenticeship programs.

In 2022, the Council of State Governments (CSG) and the Urban Institute received funding from Ascendium Education Group to expand civic sector apprenticeship programs in **Idaho** and **Maine** targeting low-income rural learners. CSG and the Urban Institute "will support state and local agencies in developing apprenticeships to meet their workforce needs, and in recruiting, enrolling and supporting low-income rural apprentices."[67]

WGU in Action

Iowa's Teacher & Paraeducator Registered Apprenticeship Program provides a no-cost opportunity for existing paraeducators to earn a bachelor's degree while learning and working in the classroom. WGU is partnered with more than 60 mostly rural school districts in Iowa as an education provider for this program.[68]

Closing Thoughts

Numerous studies[69] have demonstrated that a college education improves personal income, job security, and well-being. Despite evidence linking education to individual and societal prosperity, millions of Americans lack higher education and crucial work skills.[70] For working adult learners who desire career growth, including rising and stranded talent, effective policies can remove barriers that prevent them from achieving their potential. These policies can have life-changing effects and have broader impacts on individuals like James and Linda, the rising and stranded talent introduced on page 3. Legislation and standards that smooth the way for working adult learners help foster a skilled workforce, strengthen the economy, and create resilient communities. When higher education fulfills its purpose—providing pathways to opportunity—individuals and communities thrive.

Policy creation, however, is not the last stop on the journey to educational improvement. Policies become effective when state, local, and institutional leaders ensure that the individuals addressed by these policies understand the opportunities available to them and have the resources and support they need. WGU invites all state and local policymakers to join us as active partners in our pursuit to better serve today's working adult learners.

"One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things."

—Henry Miller

About WGU

WGU was established in 1997 by 19 U.S. governors with a mission to expand access to high-quality, affordable higher education. This online nonprofit university now serves more than 130,000 students nationwide and has more than 297,000 graduates in all 50 states. Driving innovation as the nation's leading competency-based university, WGU has been recognized by the White House, state leaders, employers, and students as a model that works in postsecondary education. In just 25 years, the university has become a leading influence in changing the lives of individuals and families and preparing the workforce needed in today's rapidly evolving economy. WGU is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, has been named one of Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, and has been featured in The New York Times and on NPR, NBC Nightly News, and CNN. Learn more at wgu.edu and wgu.edu/impact.

Please contact the Public Policy team at PublicPolicy@wgu.edu for more information.

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