

Chapter 3

Compete LA: Re-Engaging Adult Learners for Our Future

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ABSTRACT

Postsecondary education has never mattered more than it does presently. It is critical for adults, particularly for non-credentialed adults, to complete postsecondary pathways, ensuring they are prepared to compete in the global economy. Despite the well-documented benefits of a postsecondary degree, nearly one-fourth of adults in Louisiana have college experience, but no degree. Adult learners experience barriers to navigating higher education that negatively impact their ability to return and persist to graduation. Recognizing these challenges, the University of Louisiana System and their nine member institutions created Compete LA, a program designed to re-engage adult learners and create equitable academic pathways to obtaining a college degree. This chapter will serve as a case study by focusing on the creation and scaling of the Compete LA initiative. It will explore the characteristics of the team, the structural composition of the program, as well as the efforts to dismantle the systemic barriers that exist in higher education that make adult student re-entry challenging.

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INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary education has long served as a bridge to opportunity, empowering graduates to transform their economic and social circumstances. The impact of a college credential on the individual's economic and social mobility is well-documented, with studies consistently showing a strong, positive correlation between educational attainment and upward mobility (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2017; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2020). Simply put, college graduates find better jobs, earn more money, and suffer less employment loss than high school graduates. The education-wage correlation continues to strengthen over time. Between 1991 and 2017, the difference between average earnings for adults with a bachelor's degree or higher and adults with only a high school diploma rose by 24 percent (Saum, 2019).

The economic benefits of postsecondary education extend beyond the individual. Economists and labor market experts make the compelling argument that today's competitive global markets combined with accelerating technological advances have created a reality where a high school diploma alone is insufficient preparation for nearly all family-supporting careers (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2020). Moreover, the collective economic benefits of a workforce with greater educational and skill attainment can be traced to enhanced productivity and profits. These productivity gains translate into higher output for employers and often higher incomes for the workers. Non-economic societal benefits in regions with high proportions of college graduates include lower crime rates, greater and more informed civic participation, better health outcomes, and improved performance across a host of socioeconomic measures (Chan, 2016; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2020; Trostel, 2015).

Given the individual and societal benefits of higher education, it is not surprising that over 45 states during the past decade set ambitious goals to increase the educational attainment rate, the share of individuals who have obtained a college credential (Lumina Foundation, 2019). State and higher education leaders recognize the age-related demographic challenge: educational attainment goals cannot be achieved by focusing on high school students alone. Instead, efforts must be broadened to include older, adult students. In fact, adult learners have been on most state's college completion agendas for over a decade (Lumina Foundation, 2019). More recently, the discussion has shifted to an even more promising subset of this population: adult students who have already enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the past, but did not earn a credential (Shapiro et al., 2019). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) about one-fifth (20.4 percent) of the national population 25 years and over have some college experience, but no degree, compared to over one-third of the adult population (36.2 percent) who have an associate's degree or higher.

Following, and even trailing, national trends, Louisiana has a significant latent adult learner market, with 71 percent of adults (25 years and older) lacking a postsecondary degree (associate degree or higher). To date, nearly one-fourth (654,347) of adults in Louisiana have college experience, but no degree. Data also indicates attainment gaps when reviewing adult learner subgroups. Only one in five African-Americans and Hispanics ages 25 to 64 hold a degree, compared to 34 percent of whites and 46 percent of Asians (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Addressing needs of the adult learner, or reaching the adult learner market in common parlance, requires a shift in practice. Returning adults face unique challenges when it comes to re-enrolling in college. As postsecondary institutions are more attuned to addressing challenges faced by traditional students, new practices and policies should account for more diverse student characteristics and circumstances. Adults without college credentials often earn lower incomes, facing greater challenges in affording the cost of tuition and fees while balancing family and work obligations. Recognizing these challenges, the

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