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# Strategies for Re-Enrolling Adult Learners at Community Colleges

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**Center on Education & Labor & Education  
Policy**

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an equitable community college ecosystem can advance educational access & completion, economic security, and personal fulfillment.

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The New America community college team works to advance racial and gender equity through community-engaged research, storytelling, convening, policy analysis, and advocacy. We believe

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## Introduction

Approximately 36.8 million Americans aged 18–64 have some college experience but no credential.<sup>1</sup> Community colleges, which have faced the sharpest enrollment declines among institutions of higher education since the COVID-19 pandemic, play a critical role in re-engaging adult learners.<sup>2</sup> They serve as a primary access point to higher education for many students facing barriers to continuing their education, including students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, states are facing an urgent need to train and upskill their workforce to meet current and future labor market demands. More states and community colleges are prioritizing strategies to re-enroll, retain, and credential adult learners seeking to upskill or reskill.

In 2021, New America launched the Bringing Adults Back project, partnering with six community colleges across the country to design and implement re-enrollment strategies. This work culminated in the creation of the *Bringing Adults Back to Community College Playbook: Strategies and Recommendations to Increase Adult Enrollment*, a practical guide for colleges undertaking similar work.<sup>4</sup>

States and institutions are implementing targeted strategies to help adult students re-enroll. However, adult enrollment has yet to rebound to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>5</sup> Community colleges face challenges that disproportionately affect adult learners who are balancing work, family, and other responsibilities. For example, Haywood Community College in North Carolina has experienced a series of disruptions in recent years—including the closure of a major local employer, a flood, and Hurricane Helene—that have made it even more difficult for their adult students to re-enroll or persist.

New America has documented growing interest in re-enrolling adult learners; however, the adult re-enrollment field remains fragmented and complex. Community colleges are critical to educating adult learners, but can face limited resources, diverse student needs, and difficulty identifying effective strategies or implementation partners for re-enrolling adult learners.

To help address these challenges, the Center on Education & Labor at New America undertook a year-long landscape analysis, documenting efforts to reengage adult learners at the institutional, state, nonprofit, and business levels. This report surveys the current adult re-enrollment landscape and presents questions to guide future research on what strategies are most effective in inviting adults back to school.

## Research Methodology

States and community colleges are developing strategies to support adult students in re-enrolling, persisting, and ultimately earning a credential that leads to a good job. Our goal was to document efforts to re-enroll adult students who had stopped out of community colleges at the institutional, nonprofit, business, and state levels. Three research questions guided our analysis:

1. What strategies are colleges and third-party vendors using to encourage adult learners to re-enroll at community colleges?
2. What policies are being designed at the state level to encourage adult re-enrollment, and how do they interact with implementation at the community college level?
3. What does the evidence show about the effectiveness of adult re-enrollment interventions?

Grounded in these questions, we conducted a comprehensive literature review, incorporating academic and gray literature, policy documents, and government publications. We then collected and synthesized information on efforts at the state level, within individual community colleges, and through third-party vendors to facilitate adult re-enrollment. Next, we analyzed outcome data from publicly available evaluations of re-enrollment initiatives.

We considered the literature review and landscape analysis complete once our data collection consistently led back to sources already consulted. Patterns and recurring institutions identified in this secondary research informed our selection of interviewees—individuals who have played significant roles in policymaking, program development, or implementation of re-enrollment strategies. We conducted 15 semi-structured interviews. Each was led by at least two New America staff members, lasted an average of 45 minutes, and was recorded. The interview protocol was designed around a set of guiding questions, with flexibility to pursue other topics as they arose.

These interviews gave us firsthand perspectives and allowed us to explore strategies, challenges, and successes that key actors in the adult learner re-enrollment field have encountered while working to re-enroll adult learners. We discussed motivations behind specific initiatives, barriers faced by institutions, and contextual factors shaping the effectiveness of different approaches. Interviewees also shared practical examples of implementation, evidence of impact, and critical lessons learned. Additionally, we collected information on ongoing partnerships, networks, funding models, enabling policies, and long-term sustainability challenges.

The next section synthesizes data on efforts by individual community colleges and third-party vendors to facilitate adult re-enrollment. We focus on initiatives documented in gray literature published within the past decade, with particular attention to sources released after the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to enrollment declines during the pandemic, many community colleges shifted their focus to re-enrolling stopped-out adult students. The research included in this section centers on adult students who have left community college, strategies to re-engage them, and policies designed to support adult re-enrollment.

Finally, we present the findings of our analysis on state-level adult re-enrollment programs. After surveying state strategies and their funding sources, we provide a sense of how these state initiatives fared and suggest considerations for future work to help better engage and enroll adults in community college.

## Strategies Used by Community Colleges and Third-Party Vendors

Community colleges use various strategies to re-engage, re-enroll, and support adult stop-outs. Similarly, third-party vendors employ different models in partnership with individual colleges, college systems, and state agencies to help bring adults back to school. We document several of these strategies and interventions found in the gray literature. In addition to institutional examples from the literature, we include examples gathered through interviews with college administrators and experts in this field.

We found that community colleges seeking to re-enroll adult learners use multi-channel outreach to reconnect with stop-outs, often partnering with organizations like InsideTrack,<sup>6</sup> ReUp,<sup>7</sup> and CollegeAPP.<sup>8</sup> These organizations focus on supporting colleges and universities to reach and re-engage American adults who started college but never completed their degree. Colleges have also introduced academic supports such as personalized advising, flexible scheduling, and accelerated programs to help adult learners return and persist. In addition, many offer targeted financial incentives, scholarships, emergency aid, flexible payment plans, and debt forgiveness to reduce barriers and encourage re-enrollment.

While these strategies are well-documented in the literature and were mentioned in our interviews with college administrators, evidence of their overall effectiveness remains limited. Few evaluations of adult student re-enrollment strategies have been conducted. According to Justin Ortagus, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, adult re-enrollment programs are expensive to implement and costly to evaluate at scale in rigorous ways. Where possible, we include studies from publicly available sources that assess the effectiveness of adult re-enrollment interventions.

A key theme from our landscape analysis is that colleges have had to shift their culture and institutional policies to effectively re-enroll adult learners. Terah Crews, CEO of ReUp, noted, “The majority of policies at institutions were written with an 18-year-old in mind, even at community colleges, which tend to be more adult-oriented. We have to acknowledge that colleges are balancing the need to focus on traditional students with how to best attract and serve adult students, often without additional resources.” Colleges increasingly recognize that they need to take a holistic look at how their policies and processes hinder adult students from re-enrolling and persisting. Some institutions created task forces to reduce barriers for adult learners, while others designated staff members to examine policy changes and foster a campus-wide culture that supports adult learners.

## Outreach, Recruitment, and Coaching

Community colleges focused on re-enrolling adult learners are taking proactive steps to connect with potential students. The college administrators we interviewed use a variety of communication methods—mail, phone calls, text messages, emails, and postcards—to reach prospects, especially those who have previously stopped out. Research shows that adults respond best to personalized, trust-building communication that acknowledges their reasons for leaving school and provides clear steps to return, though skepticism about scams can make building rapport slow.<sup>9</sup> Some colleges partner with reputable organizations like InsideTrack and ReUp for individualized outreach. Institutions with limited budgets often prioritize “near-completers,” using data to target students most likely to re-enroll, such as those with more credits or recent attendance. Randomized trials indicate that value-based text messages and tailored coaching can modestly boost re-enrollment.<sup>10</sup>

Stop-outs in a 2024 California study reported receiving little to no communication from their college after leaving. Some recalled only a generic email about re-enrolling, which offered minimal guidance for their circumstances. Many believed that more personalized messages could have shortened their time away and supported quicker completion.<sup>11</sup> These students expressed a strong preference for individualized contact, which is communication that seeks to understand why they stopped out, explains the steps to return, and connects them to relevant resources.<sup>12</sup> They also emphasized that the most effective outreach reflects their life situations and highlights tools to help balance academics, work, and family responsibilities.<sup>13</sup>

Prospective adult learners respond to outreach that focuses on how programs offered at the colleges are directly connected to available jobs. For example, Pitt Community College (PCC) in North Carolina collaborated with employers and local economic development agencies to host a “Better Skills, Better Jobs” fair in 2021.<sup>14</sup> More than 400 prospective adult learners attended. The event focused on the types of jobs that students could access after completing career and technical education (CTE) programs. Given the event’s success, PCC hosted a similar event in 2022, which reached an additional 447 adults. The event also served as an advising opportunity, allowing students to speak one-on-one with college staff about credentials and degree requirements needed for jobs. PCC demonstrates how messaging campaigns about the financial benefits of CTE programs can increase engagement with potential adult learners.<sup>15</sup>

Third-party organizations such as InsideTrack often find it easier to engage potential re-enrollees. In fall 2022, Wake Technical Community College in North Carolina partnered with InsideTrack, a nonprofit organization that supports colleges in boosting adult student enrollment. The collaboration reached about 10,000 adults to introduce them to Wake Tech’s programs. Of

those who applied to the college due to the outreach, roughly 60 percent ultimately enrolled. Wake Tech's president noted that running a similar enrollment campaign independently would have been significantly more costly for the college.<sup>16</sup> Several college staff members told us that limited data and staff capacity often make it impractical to conduct large-scale outreach independently, so partnering with third-party vendors with more resources, technology, and data capacity is a sensible approach.

According to InsideTrack, while it is easier to reach out to potential students by phone or text, they have become increasingly wary of scams and spam. Colleges, vendors, and other organizations trying to engage adult learners know that some recipients perceive their messages as fraudulent, particularly those regarding "free college" programs, which can sound too good to be true. According to InsideTrack, building a genuine relationship with stopped-out students and personalizing outreach and coaching is the most effective way to overcome this skepticism. This process can take time, sometimes years.

It is not always feasible for community colleges to reach out to every stopped-out adult student. For instance, Harford Community College in Maryland faced a limited outreach budget and grant funding that required it to focus on near-completers. It excluded students with financial holds and prioritized those with 45 or more credits, creating a more manageable list of about 500 former students to contact. InsideTrack advises colleges to apply similar re-enrollment screening criteria, drawing on available institutional data, to identify the most promising stop-outs. To support this process, it developed a checklist of re-enrollment screens that any community college can use.<sup>17</sup>

ReUp, an organization that partners with colleges and state systems to re-engage adult learners, also uses data to prioritize stop-outs for outreach. In an 18-month partnership with the City University of New York (CUNY), it implemented an automated system to rank stop-outs for proactive coaching: Those with higher scores received outreach sooner, while those with lower scores were contacted later. While ReUp prioritized initial outreach based on the volume of the stop-out lists, all learners received outreach and had equal access to ReUp's services and coaching. This prioritization allowed staff to assist more students overall.<sup>18</sup> Eligible stop-out students were identified through a combination of data methodologies and then received targeted outreach and support from ReUp. Analysis showed that students who had stopped out more recently, completed more units, and had mid-range GPAs were more likely to re-enroll. Students who ultimately returned also had higher response rates to emails and text messages and were more likely to schedule meetings with coaches. ReUp tested multiple communication methods and found that automated emails and texts sent by coaches generated the most engagement.<sup>19</sup>

In a randomized controlled trial, a sample of students in California received emails and text messages informing them that they could opt in to an opportunity to connect with a coach for help re-enrolling in college. These students had previously received California state grants but had not completed a college credential. About 8,000 students opted in to the study. Students assigned to treatment were offered the opportunity to work with an InsideTrack coach. Students who opted in but were assigned to the control group received information about the steps required for college re-entry, including websites they could visit, but were not offered a coaching opportunity. About half of the students assigned to the treatment group actually connected with their coach. The study found no evidence that treatment assignment increased college enrollment in the following fall semester. However, coaching began in March 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the effect of coaching on college reentry in an unprecedented pandemic may be very different than effects under different conditions.<sup>20</sup>

In another randomized study at Delaware Technical Community College, a sample of over 3,000 pre-allied health students who were enrolled in fall 2019 and/or spring 2020 received text messages encouraging them to re-enroll. Some students were stop-outs and others were current students who received the text messages encouraging them to continue enrolling without disruption. Half the students were randomly assigned to receive texts that prompted recipients to consider why they wanted to pursue an allied health career, what they had already gained from college classes, and what drove their career goals. Overall, there was a significant, positive 3-percentage point impact on fall 2020 enrollment for text recipients. However, the impact on fall 2020 enrollment for stopped-out students (who were enrolled in fall 2019 but not spring 2020) was 13 percentage points.<sup>21</sup> The intervention was particularly effective for students who had already stopped out, in other words, whereas current students saw a smaller benefit.

## **Academic Support and Flexibility**

Colleges use a mix of personalized advising, flexible scheduling, and accelerated programs to help adult learners re-enroll and succeed. Dedicated advisors guide returning students through every step, from financial aid to course selection, offering consistent one-on-one support. Moreover, flexibility is key: Many institutions offer online classes, evening and weekend options, hybrid courses, and shorter, eight-week terms. These strategies give adult students multiple entry points, more manageable schedules, and tailored guidance, making it easier to balance education with work and family responsibilities.

A 2023 report from InsideTrack advises institutions that prioritize supporting adult learners to provide dedicated advisors to guide students through financial aid, course selection, and registration, since “the goal is not to get through a queue of students as fast as possible, but to ensure every student gets access to the information they need through the conversation.”<sup>22</sup> Returning students have pointed to one-on-one advising, especially with the same staff member, as being helpful for their academic and career choices.<sup>23</sup>

We spoke with several college administrators who offer dedicated advisors for adult learners. At Harford Community College, the most experienced advisors are assigned to support adult students. They are involved in every stage of the student’s academic journey, from re-enrollment to completion, and they aim to resolve issues directly rather than referring students to other departments. Funding from NC Reconnect, the state’s adult re-enrollment initiative, has enabled Haywood Community College to provide stipends to some academic coaches who focus exclusively on adult learners.<sup>24</sup> These dedicated coaches ensure that students receive clear, thorough answers to their questions, rather than being passed from office to office. They help returning adult students with academic and non-academic challenges, such as financial aid, tutoring, and access to other resources.

Colleges have also implemented flexible scheduling and accelerated programs to better support adult students. A California study of adult learners who had previously stopped out, re-enrolled, and were either close to graduation or had completed their degrees found that being entirely online was a key factor in their ability to return and finish.<sup>25</sup> These students also cited the benefits of eight-week terms, also known as accelerated schedules, which offered more frequent entry points and greater flexibility than traditional 16-week semesters.<sup>26</sup>

Research shows that accelerated programs at community colleges are linked to higher average grades and lower withdrawal rates, particularly among minority, adult, and lower-income students.<sup>27</sup> In addition to online classes and accelerated programs, some colleges have experimented with evening, weekend, and hybrid courses to offer more options for adult learners. At Haywood Community College, for example, flexibility extends beyond course formats. The college held an orientation for adult learners at 5 p.m., which was its most attended session. It also offers advising times outside of regular operating hours during the registration period, giving adult learners more opportunities to meet advisors around their work and family commitments.

## Financial Incentives and Support

Community colleges are using financial incentives to remove barriers and motivate adult learners to return, offering scholarships, emergency aid, flexible payment plans, and even the discharge of small debts. A Florida study found that pairing re-enrollment texts with a tuition waiver increased adult re-enrollment by nearly 30 percent.<sup>28</sup>

The cost of attending college often prohibits adult stop-outs who face financial and time pressures from returning.<sup>29</sup> Some stop-outs have outstanding debts to their former colleges, such as unpaid course fees, parking tickets, or library fines, which hinder re-enrollment. Many states, including Ohio and Tennessee, have implemented re-enrollment programs that offer financial aid and/or institutional debt cancellation for adults seeking to return to school.

Institutions have also introduced scholarships for adult learners, emergency financial aid, and flexible payment plans, and offered to pay off small balances to encourage re-enrollment. For example, Haywood Community College used funding from NC Reconnect to settle minor debts like bookstore charges and other common fines. The program director said that paying off small balances was one of the easiest to implement and most effective strategies for reducing barriers to re-enrollment. Similarly, Harford College used grant funding from its state, Maryland, to cover textbook costs and provide scholarships to incentivize adult students to return.

Colleges in states without statewide adult re-enrollment programs are also prioritizing financial incentives. At York Technical College in South Carolina, the Reconnect program offers scholarships covering a full program that must be completed within 15 months. Former students who haven't attended in the past two semesters and haven't completed a credential are eligible to apply, unless they have financial holds or are in default on student loans. Results suggest the program contributed to a more than 20 percent increase in enrollment and a 15 percent rise in applications, including those for re-enrollment. Students in the Reconnect program performed at or above the general student population, with 78 percent persisting from fall to spring.<sup>30</sup>

Pueblo Community College in Colorado launched a "Return to Earn Program," providing returning students with a one-time \$2,000 scholarship and individualized enrollment support. Participants must have earned at least 25 percent of the credits required for graduation and have no financial holds. The scholarship can be used for current or past balances, but it is awarded only after successful completion of the first returning term.<sup>31</sup> Since its launch in 2016, 450 students have graduated through the program, with 90 percent passing their first semester back with a "C" average or better.<sup>32</sup>

Our *Bringing Adults Back* playbook featured Mt. Hood Community College's efforts to incentivize students to re-enroll. Mt. Hood reduced the outstanding balances that students owed to the college, allowing it to lift registration holds. The college invested \$107,000 in this effort, aimed at 685 students. Of this number, 285 re-enrolled for the following term. This increase in enrollment resulted in a nearly \$400,000 return on investment, and it helped increase Mt. Hood's 2022 fall enrollment for the first time in five years.<sup>33</sup>

A randomized controlled trial involving 27,028 stop-outs from five large Florida community colleges explored the impact of re-engagement strategies. Eligible students had a GPA of at least 2.0, a minimum of 30 accumulated credits, and no enrollment holds. The control group received no messages. One treatment group received text messages with re-enrollment information and a link to a site addressing financial aid and enrollment questions. A second group received the same information plus a tuition waiver for their first course upon re-enrollment. Among former students aged 25 and older, the second treatment (text and tuition waiver) resulted in a 29.8 percent increase in re-enrollment. Information texts alone did not significantly affect re-enrollment for this group.<sup>34</sup>

## Strategies Used by States

Individual institutions or community college districts can implement initiatives to welcome adults back to community college, but colleges may lack the capacity to develop and operate such initiatives on their own. States engaging in adult re-enrollment work can use these initiatives to expand and sustain effective work across institutions. And when adult learners re-enroll, the state's workforce—and tax base—stand to benefit from additional credentials earned, which provides a return on the state's investment in higher education.

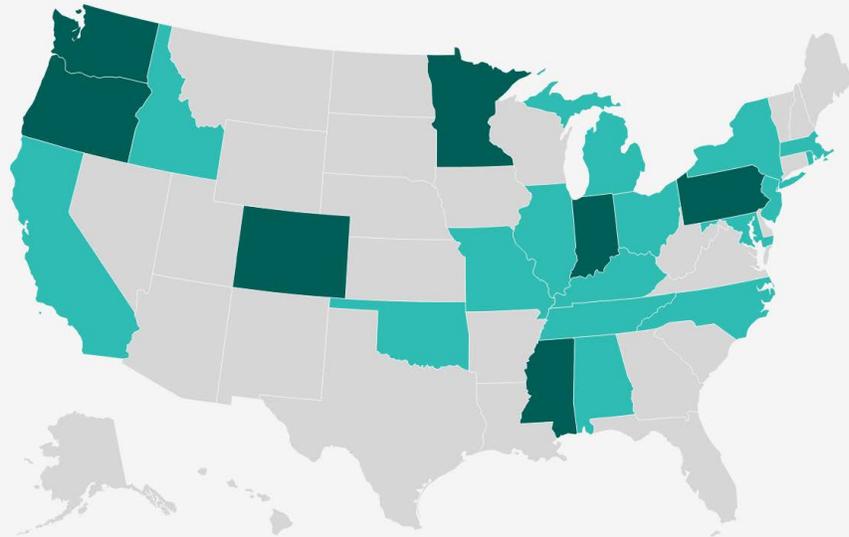
We reviewed state initiatives to bring adults back to community colleges over the years to identify trends in strategy, funding, sustainability, and implementation successes and challenges. In addition to document review and desk research, we interviewed individuals at four state higher education agencies and two colleges about their experiences with state-level adult re-enrollment efforts.

We identified re-enrollment initiatives that include community colleges and adult learners in 22 states. Some of these include other institutions of higher education. Others include younger students as well as adults. In addition to these 22 states, several other states reference adult re-enrollment in their strategic plans but do not appear to have active initiatives addressing this priority. We also found states that provide adult learners with landing pages emphasizing the importance of returning to college and directing them to re-enrollment and financial resources; however, these are not included in our count. For our analysis, we only count initiatives that somehow involve state government and are open to adults who could re-enroll in community colleges. Of the initiatives we identified, seven have been sunset or are scheduled to end by the close of 2025.

Our analysis identified four main components of state adult re-enrollment strategies. States generally focus on providing financial resources to returning learners and/or institutions, providing streamlined support for navigating college, communicating the value of re-enrolling, and providing technical assistance to colleges. Some states implement only one component, while others combine two or more as part of their adult re-enrollment strategy.

**Figure 1 | State Community College Adult Re-Enrollment Initiatives**

■ Active Programs ■ Inactive Programs ■ No Programs



Source: Original analysis from New America

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## Funding for Institutions and Adult Learners

Many state-level initiatives focused on reducing the cost burden on adult students who could or have re-enrolled in college. Strained financial resources are a common barrier for adult learners, as time spent in class or studying is time not spent working and earning, which is an especially high opportunity cost for students with dependents. Although the short-term costs can be high, evidence points to a strong return on investment in the longer term.

Examples of this kind of state subsidy include MassReconnect, funded by the Massachusetts legislature, which provides last-dollar financial aid to learners 25 and older at public community colleges.<sup>35</sup> MassReconnect recipients with significant financial need may access supplemental assistance through the program for books, supplies, and other education-related expenses.<sup>36</sup> In Alabama, residents 25 and older who have not been enrolled in higher education for at least two years and are close to earning their first degree can apply for a last-dollar award through (Re)Engage Alabama to support their direct higher education expenses.<sup>37</sup> As with MassReconnect, (Re)Engage Alabama is funded by appropriations from the state legislature.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than providing financial aid, initiatives in Ohio offer relief from institutional debt for eligible individuals who return to college. Launched in 2022 as a pilot, the Ohio College Comeback Compact incorporated eight public institutions of higher education in northeast Ohio, all committed to reducing barriers to re-enrollment.<sup>39</sup> Students who previously stopped out of a participating institution can re-enroll at any participating college. After successfully re-enrolling and completing a semester, they are eligible to have some or all of their institutional debt forgiven.<sup>40</sup>

Many stakeholders collaborated to make this agreement happen. Three foundations provided financial support.<sup>41</sup> The Ohio Department of Higher Education provided guidance.<sup>42</sup> Ithaka S+R provided technical assistance, and ReUp was brought in during the second year to scale up outreach efforts. In the first two years of the Comeback Compact, Ithaka S+R reported that participating colleges forgave approximately \$400,000 of institutional debt, yet brought in nearly \$1.6 million in tuition from students who re-enrolled thanks to the initiative.<sup>43</sup> The College Comeback Compact offers an example of a re-enrollment effort with a light touch from the state that yielded a strong return on investment.

Some states offer grants to support re-enrollment, which gives institutions considerable latitude in how funds can be used. In these initiatives, the state either provides or secures resources and manages distribution to institutions and compliance with grant requirements. Maryland's One Step Away grant, for example, provides two to three colleges and universities per year with a small grant—most recently, \$60,000—to carry out approved activities to support near-completers' path to a degree.<sup>44</sup> Missouri has recently provided some of its institutions of higher education grants using philanthropic resources, and it offers recipient institutions considerable latitude in carrying out re-enrollment initiatives that best suit their institution and students.

## **Support for Adults Navigating Re-Enrollment**

Research indicates that adult learners prefer to have one contact person to help them manage a return to college, from re-enrolling to completing a credential. Several states have incorporated this intervention into their adult re-enrollment strategies. This role—often called a *navigator*—builds a connection with a prospective adult learner and supports their path through college.

In Mississippi, the state's Complete 2 Compete (C2C) initiative included financial aid and navigation for eligible residents 21 and over who had not been enrolled for at least two years but were close to earning their first degree.<sup>45</sup> Each participating institution designated a campus lead for the program and a C2C Coach to support adults navigating re-admission. Coaches received

training on the C2C initiative and how to manage the program data dashboard for their institution.<sup>46</sup>

In Tennessee, Navigate Reconnect provides institution-agnostic information about higher education opportunities and support to adults interested in returning to or enrolling in college. The program's 2024 annual report shows that between 2019–21, almost 11,000 residents received re-enrollment support from a navigator.<sup>47</sup> Navigate Reconnect began in 2016, based on the Graduate Memphis model. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) launched it through an application process that built Tennessee Reconnect Communities, and navigation services were distributed through these Reconnect Community hubs. Before 2019, Reconnect Communities were responsible for hiring and training Reconnect Advisors for their respective areas with the idea that people rooted in the community would help build trust with potentially returning adults. In 2019, THEC assumed leadership of Navigate Reconnect completely so that the program would be disseminated across the state.

## **Outreach and Marketing to Adult Learners**

It is much easier for community colleges to market themselves to young students preparing to leave high school than it is to locate and communicate with working adults about enrolling. This pool of prospective and returning learners is dispersed. Launching a statewide marketing strategy for working adults is a common way states engage in adult re-enrollment work, including texting campaigns, traditional mailers, broadcast media ads, and social media posts. Standardized, premade messaging can help establish a brand and ease the burden on individual institutions to create their own marketing content.

Many states have partnered with vendors to identify, contact, and support adults who could benefit from re-enrolling in college rather than developing and disseminating messaging themselves. California Reconnect, a philanthropically funded pilot program of approximately 30 colleges, leverages InsideTrack to provide navigation support to adult learners.<sup>48</sup> ReUp has contracted with numerous states, including Illinois, Michigan, and North Carolina, to reach prospective adult students and provide initial navigation support. And states like Michigan and Missouri are working with CollegeApp to analyze data and identify adult residents most likely to re-enroll in college, allowing for targeted messaging.<sup>49</sup>

## Technical Assistance for Colleges

States have also used various measures to deliver technical assistance to colleges as they work to welcome adult learners back to college. Whether state governance structures and reconnect financing lend themselves more to top-down or bottom-up approaches to collaboration, sharing lessons in a coordinated way among institutions is something states should consider as they design or hone their reconnect efforts.

In Pennsylvania, Ithaka S+R partnered with the Pennsylvania Department of Education to facilitate a philanthropically funded learning community.<sup>50</sup> Comprised of representatives from institutions of higher education across the state, this learning community focused on adult re-enrollment. Participants shared what they learned as they worked to increase re-enrollment over a year. Institutions focused on initiatives like redesigning their websites to be clearer and more welcoming for returning adults and right-sizing their institutional adult re-enrollment goals using available data.<sup>51</sup> The group wrapped up in November 2025, and participants hope to sustain the work they began through this initiative.

In some states, adult re-enrollment efforts can lead to inter-institutional support and coordinated technical assistance. How this peer learning happens varies. For example, Missouri is developing coordinated technical assistance for institutions participating in the Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development's adult re-enrollment initiative. Agency leaders hope this technical assistance will enhance institutions' capacity to engage and serve adult learners and foster cross-institutional learning.

In North Carolina, "what we've done very successfully," says Carrie Lockhart of InsideTrack, is create "a cohort of schools that become connected to one another. They're learning from one another. They're now advocating for each other. Instead of trying to do it top-down, the bottom-up approach and the coalition-building [works], instead of just trying to go after everyone all at once."

## Integrating Diverse Funding Sources

Public funding for specific initiatives, like adult reconnect efforts, is inconsistent. Given fluctuating priorities and varied funding levels, states have employed creative strategies to secure the money needed to carry out this work. Often, this entails resources from private philanthropy, sometimes combined with state support. Several re-enrollment initiatives have been launched, implemented, and then discontinued, sometimes within just a few years. This section details how states have—or have not—managed to fund adult re-enrollment initiatives.

For many states, the initial funding source for adult re-enrollment was private philanthropy. For example, Lumina Foundation provided grants to 15 states through its Adult Promise initiative from 2017 to 2019.<sup>52</sup> Grantees used resources to enhance or expand efforts to enroll and support adult learners through graduation. A different grant from Lumina allowed the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to build a vision and plan to improve recruitment and retention of adults. In Missouri, resources from ECMC foundation fund the state Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development's (DHEWD) work on adult re-enrollment and support. The grant supports DHEWD as it implements communications strategies that reach communities across the state, and colleges in Missouri's four largest metropolitan areas were able to apply for grants of approximately \$20,000 to support adult re-engagement work tailored to their community.

NC Reconnect has also been philanthropically funded, but in a much more consistent way than the previously described initiatives, relying on startup grant funding from philanthropy. The John M. Belk Endowment in North Carolina has provided resources to NC Reconnect since 2021, when the first cohort of participating colleges launched, growing to include more institutions in NC Reconnect over time.<sup>53</sup> The Belk Endowment has, in addition to providing support to returning adults, supported regular evaluation of NC Reconnect and peer learning for participating colleges.

In Mississippi, the Complete 2 Compete (C2C) launched in 2017 as a multi-pronged strategy engaging at the institutional and student level. Eligible learners 21 and older with some college credit but no degree could access tuition assistance and navigation to support their progress.<sup>54</sup> Institutions could receive grants to provide additional tuition assistance to eligible students, as well as facilitate prior learning assessment, provide coaching, or market college opportunities. The program was funded through a blend of grants from state agencies (Mississippi Department of Human Services and the Mississippi Department of Employment Services<sup>55</sup>) and philanthropic resources.<sup>56</sup> As of summer 2025, though, C2C had completely ended after first excluding community college students from receiving grants in fall 2024.<sup>57</sup>

In Minnesota, legislatively appropriated funds proved unpredictable in ways that hampered the MN Reconnect Scholarship. A bill that included funding for the program did not move forward in the 2017-18 legislative cycle, so leaders had to consider more limited resources when it launched in 2018. These resources included Lumina's Adult Promise grant.<sup>58</sup> MN Reconnect received appropriated funds in the next state budget cycle,<sup>59</sup> which allowed the program to more than double participating institutions in the second and third years. However, the end of the Adult Promise initiative and lack of appropriated funding in the subsequent biennial state budget spelled the end of the program in 2021.

Maryland's One Step Away grant has proved more sustainable but has operated on a relatively small scale.<sup>60</sup> Each year since the program started in 2013, there have been two or three recipient colleges given considerable latitude for how they use resources to support adult learners' re-enrollment and progress toward a credential. In total, 17 colleges and universities have received at least one One Step Away grant, including eight community colleges.<sup>61</sup> The grants are approximately \$60,000 per year, but the longevity of this program is remarkable, given that it relies on legislative funding. For Maryland, small and steady seems to have kept this grant program operating and benefiting students, a few institutions at a time.

## **Balancing State Coordination and Local Nuance**

State higher education structures vary widely, from having no governing or coordinating body to closely coordinated systems within and across education sectors. These structures influence how states engage in adult re-enrollment efforts. It is often challenging to balance allowing colleges autonomy in how they re-enroll adults and implementing a re-enrollment campaign for institutions across the state.

The four components most commonly found in adult re-enrollment initiatives—financial support, navigation support, marketing/communications, and technical assistance—depend on whether institutions or states manage them. Our interviews explored how different states approach finding this balance and highlighted factors that can help other states tailor re-enrollment strategies to their organizational and geographic contexts.

Where a governor or state agency has set a goal for state higher education attainment, this goal can provide the foundation for a coordinated effort to reach adults who could benefit from re-enrolling in college. In many cases, state communications campaigns about adult re-enrollment make it easy for returning adults to enroll at the institution that best fits their current needs, rather than directing them back to the campus they most recently attended.

Taking a state-level approach that pools adults interested in re-enrolling can nudge colleges to collaborate more effectively. Terah Crews of ReUp spoke of the impact of coordinated state messaging campaigns, saying, "Individual institutions are often not incentivized to collaborate with each other. But when a state comes in and says, 'We are going to sponsor this, and we are going to manage this as a state,' then those barriers to collaboration really begin to disappear and outcomes improve." Working as a group of institutions within a state can encourage colleges to align on welcoming back adult learners.

Ideally, a statewide adult re-enrollment program enhances colleges' capacity to engage working adults in their service areas. On the other hand, it can be

helpful to allow space for the local and institutional nuance needed to effectively engage adults and encourage them to enroll in community college.

For example, Minnesota provided financial and navigation support to help adults re-enroll and support them across several community colleges in the state. However, student eligibility requirements for the MN Reconnect Scholarship were unclear, and data systems made it difficult for college staff to determine a prospective student's eligibility. These challenges led to confused students who discovered they were not eligible for program support. Enthusiasm and resources at the state level made the program's launch possible. Yet, institutional implementation proved difficult in ways that college leaders could have helped the state avoid, had there been a more collaborative relationship as the program was developed. One interviewee described the challenges of top-down re-enrollment initiatives: "The state doesn't have all the answers, a lot of times not even centralized data points. How [are colleges] going to navigate this? Is it going to be campus agnostic? And is there a transfer pathway? All of those different questions come into play." Coordinated communications strategies across a state are one matter, and managing eligibility and implementing state-directed student supports are another.

Tennessee provides an example of how effective coordination at the state level, in partnership with institutions of higher education, can be successful. When the state began its adult re-enrollment work through TN Reconnect in 2014, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) analyzed institutional data to identify former students aged 25–64 who had not been enrolled for at least two years and had not earned a credential elsewhere but had earned at least half the credits needed for an associate or bachelor's degree. In addition to lists of these adult learners, THEC offered colleges and universities marketing materials with messaging that would be consistent across the state. Institutions were responsible for sending out mailers, provided by THEC, to these former students and following up via phone and email.

Additionally, in early 2016, the state launched advertising campaigns with the same messaging about college re-enrollment for adults on broadcast media across Tennessee.<sup>62</sup> THEC also clearly delineated its own role and that of institutions in TN Reconnect through an institutional guidebook and regular meetings of designated campus representatives.<sup>63</sup> By providing resources, materials, and guidance, THEC expanded colleges' capacity to reach out to and re-enroll adult learners while leveraging the strength of each college's local brand and presence.

Some states have adult re-enrollment programs that provide grants on a competitive basis to institutions in the state. Maryland has offered the One Step Away grant since 2013 to support institutional efforts to recruit and retain individuals who are close to earning a degree. Recipients can use the grant for

various activities, including marketing to prospective students, offering additional financial aid to students, and providing navigator support. Over the years, community college recipients of One Step Away have ranged from Harford Community College, a rural-serving institution with approximately 5,000 students, to the Community College of Baltimore County, serving over 15,000 students. Harford, for example, has used its grants over the 10 years it has received them to provide incentive scholarships for re-enrolling students and offer “concierge advising” that connects incoming students with a navigator from recruitment to program completion. The sustainability of this grant program and the fact that institutions can direct funds toward their specific needs have allowed the state to provide a lighter touch in encouraging adult re-enrollment.

Missouri is supporting a subset of institutions working to re-enroll adults. Participating colleges received grants, and leaders at the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development indicated that many institutions are using these grants to expand work they had already set in motion to re-engage adult learners. Rather than pushing institutions to change course and adopt a state-imposed strategy, Missouri allows each participating college to use resources in ways that suit its institution and community best.

## **Sustaining Adult Re-Enrollment Strategies**

Launching adult re-enrollment initiatives is a complex undertaking, and sustaining these initiatives presents an even greater challenge. Even if states initially provide resources, continually securing those funds can be challenging. And sustainability is not limited to the question of funding. Once the initial push to re-enroll adults is over, states must find ways to embed the importance of adult students’ access and success in the culture of their agency and the state’s institutions of higher education. We learned through our research that states have employed various strategies to solidify adult re-enrollment efforts within community college operations, both within the state and beyond the sector, to reach and serve the state’s working adults.

Some states may compel all institutions to participate in adult re-enrollment initiatives, while others limit participation to specific colleges or select participants through a competitive process. Institutions that participate are likely to have a champion on campus committed to adult re-enrollment work. For Harford Community College, a vice president brought vision and enthusiasm to the goal of supporting returning adult learners when the state launched One Step Away. The college applied for the grant in the program’s first year and has since received 10 One Step Away grants—more than any other college in Maryland except one.<sup>64</sup> In Missouri, institutions applying for grant funds through the state’s adult re-engagement initiative were required to

submit plans to sustain funding after the sunset of the grant. The state has prioritized engaging institutions with an eye to the future alongside plans to do good work in the near term.

Minnesota's efforts to re-enroll adults in higher education have faced numerous challenges, particularly in sustaining resources for these initiatives. Changing priorities among policymakers has made funding unreliable and, after a few short years, the MN Reconnect program ended. MN Reconnect was highly coordinated across the state, well-funded, and ramped up quickly. Despite its short life, one change that Lake Superior College (LSC) made during the Reconnect era has stuck and continues to benefit students. Additional resources for advising and navigation enabled LSC to place an experienced advisor at the college's smaller campuses, in addition to the main campus. Advising available at campuses that many adult students use—and the familiarity of a friendly face—continues to support these learners today, six years after the close of Reconnect. In this case, despite the loss of state funding and coordination, expanded services were sustained on an institutional level.

Tennessee has taken an innovative approach to sustaining and expanding the reach of Tennessee Reconnect. The state operates an “ambassadors” program, which engages individuals outside of higher education who interact with adults who may benefit from enrolling in community college.<sup>65</sup> State employees outside of THEC can serve as ambassadors. For example, THEC staff train ambassadors who work in the state Department of Human Services, Department of Labor, and Department of Corrections to present information about enrolling in community college and the support they could receive to pursue education and training. When resources are scarce, this strategy helps the state distribute the responsibility of sharing education and training opportunities available to residents.

Making the case for sustained resources and attention, especially when money is tight, requires evidence that adult re-enrollment initiatives provide a return on investment. For this reason, it is crucial to consider the time and cost of rigorous evaluation before re-enrollment efforts begin. Program evaluations should, at the very least, indicate where strategies are effective and where there is either room for improvement or a component of re-enrollment work where the costs outweigh the benefits.

## Areas for Further Research

Many different organizations and stakeholders are working to re-enroll adult learners in community colleges. We documented efforts at the institutional, nonprofit, business, and state levels. However, further research is needed to identify the most effective strategies for supporting community colleges in these re-enrollment efforts and helping adult learners persist and complete credentials that align with in-demand jobs.

In the absence of extensive research, colleges and states have implemented approaches they believe will work, with mixed results. Lingering research questions include:

- Which outreach methods generate the most engagement with potential re-enrollees?
- What value-based messaging resonates most with potential re-enrollees?
- How does the availability of accelerated, flexible programs and stackable pathways influence re-enrollment decisions and promote persistence?
- Are financial incentives, such as debt forgiveness, canceled fees and fines, and scholarships, effective in motivating re-enrollment? What is the return on investment for such programs?
- Which advising models are most effective for supporting adult learners, from pre-enrollment through completion?

The availability of data is crucial to studying the effectiveness of re-enrollment strategies; however, more research is needed on how to support community colleges in effectively collecting, storing, and using this information. Institutions need guidance on what data to collect and update from current students that will enable outreach if a student stops out. They also need to understand how to use data to identify and contact students who are likely to return, as well as what information to track for adult re-enrollees to measure persistence and outcomes. Addressing these questions is crucial to enhancing re-enrollment efforts and supporting adult learners through to completion.

Some states have implemented statewide re-enrollment programs, but questions remain about their effectiveness. How many students should states aim to re-enroll? How should states design these programs to ensure their goals are accomplished? Research is needed to understand how financial

sustainability can be built into these programs, to ensure consistent funding and allow states to expand initiatives while providing colleges with the flexibility to adapt strategies to their local contexts. Identifying the partnerships necessary to successfully run and implement statewide programs is also essential to their long-term success.

Finally, more research is needed to understand the motivations and barriers faced by the students themselves. Implementing re-enrollment strategies does not always guarantee increased participation, as adult learners often contend with life circumstances that influence their decision to return to school. Research is needed to determine how programs can be made more appealing to adult learners and how barriers to re-enrollment can be addressed through these programs. In particular, the effectiveness of advising that connects students to wraparound services, such as child care, financial aid counseling, and transportation, should be studied, as these supports may play a critical role in both re-enrollment decisions and persistence.

## Conclusion

This report highlights the increasingly complex landscape of adult re-enrollment in community colleges, emphasizing the need for approaches that are effective, sustainable, and scalable. While initiatives have emerged at both the state and institutional levels, coordination and clarity around effectiveness remain limited. State strategies for adult re-enrollment aim to help adults return and complete their credentials; however, implementation at the community college level varies. Statewide coordination and support must be balanced with institutional autonomy so that strategies meet the specific needs of learners within their local contexts. As strategies and policies around re-enrollment evolve and the question of sustaining these initiatives grows more pressing, research will be critical in identifying and refining effective approaches that not only bring adults back to college but also support their success through completion and beyond.

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