

Adult Learner Study: Barriers to and Opportunities for Pursuing Postsecondary Pathways

WSAC engaged with BERK Consulting to conduct twelve focus groups with adult learners across the state in 2022. Funded by the Lumina Foundation, the study focuses on populations furthest from educational opportunities, including those from racial and ethnic groups with the lowest attainment levels; low-income, unemployed, and underemployed residents; those who are parenting; and those who would be attempting postsecondary education or training for the first time (as opposed to those with some college experience but no degree). Ninety-four potential adult learners participated in a focus group or interview in the spring of 2022, exploring pathways to becoming adult learners, current education and career goals, sources of motivation, information- and opportunity-seeking behavior, barriers to accessing education, and promotive factors to accessing education.

Significance of Study

This study informs efforts to meet the statewide attainment goal of 70% of the state's 25- to 44-year-olds (i.e., our early and mid-career residents) having a postsecondary credential. Achieving the 70% attainment goal will require significant investment in adult learner enrollment and completion. The state workforce development system and Career Connect Washington (CCW) are also exploring how to better serve adults with career development goals. Several key themes from the study highlight areas for state-level collaboration between education and the workforce in service of Washington adults.

Themes

Adult learners are a dispersed population and could benefit significantly from a local and regional approach.

- Education decisions are tightly bound with financial decisions.
- Prospective students and navigators need information from education entities and local job markets to determine the return on investment.

"I would do an education or training program if it were set up for working professionals who need to take things at a slower pace without facing consequences or losing their funding. I would also need to get an off-campus job, because on-campus jobs don't pay enough and don't have enough hours to cover housing costs. I don't want to worry about experiencing homelessness."

Family is important in the context of adult learners.

- Families have a high impact on adults' education and career decisions.
- Youth are highly influenced by messages from family members.
- Parenting adults place a high relevance on the need to role model for their children and support their children's education.
- Childcare has been in crisis with a limited supply.
 - Challenges of finding childcare that meshes with learning schedule and is affordable.
 - Limited from accessing public subsidies for childcare.

"Give information through workshops and events provided by my children's school, so I can learn about opportunities that are out there for my family."

"My kids are the push to [pursue education] but also the reason I could not do it. But I need to be an example.... It's challenging to find time and life balance, especially having children and starting classes so late."

Colleges and universities have been primarily focused on supporting pathways from K-12 directly to postsecondary—adult learners need specialized coaching and mentoring to navigate their college and career pathway.

- Adults over the age of 25 feel disconnected from the education system, leading to feelings of being “too old” for further education and training.
- Importance of peer navigators and mentors to provide guidance specifically related to adult learner needs and barriers.
- Coordination of outreach messaging and investment in a deeper understanding of specific barriers.
 - Minimize the over-burdening of specific groups with too much information and/or conflicting information.
- Overall lack of adult learner representation in outreach, navigation, and other support services.

"I would go back to school if the organization had a mentor for those who are interested. Yes, the website is available, but a mentor can help with the process."

"I had a horrible experience.... It was difficult getting answers about what was expected of me to apply. I had to delay my application to the program for a year due to the lack of communication and difficulty getting any direction. I stumbled through it. My younger sister is always like 'I don't know how you do it and who you are talking to.' I'm like 'I'm talking to a wall.'"

Many adult learners connect with education and training later in life.

- Role of employers and workplaces in motivating adults.
- Financial pressures leading to questioning of feasibility of education and training before retirement.

"My boss at my current job has been very supportive and encouraging. They're willing to be super flexible if there's a test, and they will allow me to leave early. They're helping me achieve what I want."