

MAKING CERTIFICATE AND DEGREE COMPLETION MORE AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE FOR LOW-WAGE WORKERS

FEBRUARY 2019



One quarter of California's workforce – almost 5 million workers – earned an average of \$13 per hour in 2018. Often, low-wage workers do not have the education or training they need to move into higher-wage jobs making it difficult to obtain the skills needed to advance in their current job or transition to higher-wage employment in another field.



While California has made a commitment to college for all, many Californians still face significant financial, educational and navigational barriers to completing the education and training they need to succeed in today's labor market. Many of these workers are supporting families making it difficult to return to college and for those that go back to college for a certificate or degree, it often takes years to successfully complete and many fail to complete at all.



California's 114 community colleges account for 59% of higher education enrollment in the state. In 2016-17, California community colleges produced almost 85,000 certificates and 139,000 associate degrees. But significant achievement gaps exist, and students often take more college units and spend more time reaching their personal goals than necessary and many are unable to reach their goals.

California needs to take bold steps to tackle college affordability, achieve greater transparency around pathways and credentials, and make college more accessible for all.

We have made progress addressing these barriers in recent years. With the ongoing support of policymakers, practitioners, advocates, business and labor we are now poised to close the significant skill and equity gaps facing our state and achieve a broadly shared prosperity.

Tackling college affordability

There is widespread recognition that California needs to retool how the state invests in financial aid and, more broadly, how we make post-secondary education and skills training affordable. California's financial aid program, the Cal Grant program, was originally designed to assist recent high school graduates with the tuition-related costs associated with college attendance.

Now almost 40% of California community college students are adults, over 25 years of age. Many of these students are returning to school to obtain skills, credentials, and degrees needed to compete in today's labor market. They are often employed in low-wage work and are self-supporting or family-supporting, making the cost of college attendance – which is far greater than just tuition and fees – a major barrier. And some students are facing problems of homelessness and hunger in order to get the education and skills they need to earn middle-class wages and achieve greater prosperity. California must do a better job of supporting lower income students' ability to pay for non-tuition costs such as housing, food, childcare, transportation and textbooks.

Governor Newsom's proposed budget calls for California to make a "down payment" toward college affordability. The proposed budget would provide supplemental awards for student-parents, create a modest expansion of the number of competitive awards typically utilized by non-traditional students who are often older and from lower-income households, and extend the California College Promise program that waives enrollment fees for first-time, full-time students for a second academic year. Also of note, is the Administration's stated intent to build on these investments to work toward making the total cost of college more affordable for all students, but particularly for the lowest income students in our state.

Next steps:

- Provide greater need-based financial aid to help cover the total cost of college attendance and ensure that aid is provided regardless of age, time out of high school, or prior academic history.
- Address housing, transportation, childcare, and food insecurity issues facing low-income college students.
- Develop additional counseling and advising services to assist students with career and academic planning to ensure that they move efficiently towards their personal goals.

**Almost 5 million
California
workers earn
an average of
\$13 per hour.**



**Roughly 40%
of community
college
students are
over 25 years
of age.**

Achieving greater transparency on education and training pathways and credentials

All Californians – students, workers, practitioners, policymakers, and employers – benefit from easy-to-navigate, transparent and accessible information on the pathways and credentials offered in both the public and private sectors. The implementation of guided pathways – a process of redesigning college programs and student supports to facilitate student choice, progress, and certification or degree completion – should result in more transparent and easy-to-navigate pathways that ensure students are better able to make good decisions on programs of study and more rapid progress towards certificate or degree completion. Students also need better information on what credentials and degrees are available and the labor market returns on their investment of time and money.

Next steps:

- **Create roadmaps for stackable credentials and pathways in high-demand occupations and fields.**
- **Develop a process for identifying educational and occupational credentials and their related competencies for programs offered by public and private educational and training entities in California.**
- **Publish data on the quality of program offerings, including time-to-completion and outcome information on programs of study.**

Making college accessible for all

Adult students often need smooth pathways into college and the flexibility that the traditional college schedule does not easily provide. More than 140,000 California students per year are enrolled in GED or high school equivalency programs. These students failed to finish high school when they were minors and are taking high school coursework in adult education classes. Offering them an easy pathway to co-enrollment in credit-bearing community college courses, particularly career education courses, could jump-start their post-secondary education and increase their chances for college and career success. Adult

students also benefit from clearly articulated courses that minimize the taking of excess units, evening and weekend classes, and a process for awarding credit for competencies they may have already acquired at the workplace. Another promising strategy is the creation of a new online college that beginning in the fall of 2019 will offer short-term, affordable credentials to Californians who lack a college degree or certificate. When fully up and running, this new college will offer an array of courses designed for working adults who don't have the flexibility to go to a college campus. The intent is to offer stackable, industry-valued credentials that can lead to upward mobility for low-skilled workers. The college also plans to develop a competency-based learning process to reward workers with college credit for the skills they have acquired on the job.

Next steps:

- Simplify the dual enrollment process to provide easy transitions from high school Career and Technical Education (CTE) and adult education programs into the community college.
- Ensure that the online college develops stackable credentials with employer engagement, wrap-around supports, and a focus on economic mobility.
- Develop and scale-up credit-for-prior learning models to make it easier for adults to earn college credit in areas of competency attainment.



California Hospital Association
California Labor Federation, AFL-CIO
California Manufacturers and Technology Association
California Workforce Association
Career Ladders Project for the CA Community Colleges
Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce
PolicyLink
State Building and Construction Trades of California
UnidosUS

1107 9th Street, Suite 610, Sacramento, California 95814
916.706.0160

www.californiaedgecoalition.org