

# 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup>



### 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

The cost of internet access can also prove burdensome. Among 35 countries studied, the United States has the second-highest broadband costs.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

- 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,<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

### 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.<sup>16</sup> Reconnect programs in states like **Michigan**<sup>17</sup> and **Tennessee**<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> However, only a quarter of eligible households have accessed this discount.<sup>21</sup>

## 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.

## Learn More

This information has been taken from WGU's State Public Playbook. If you would like to view the references or access the full playbook, please visit <https://tinyurl.com/wguspp>.