

Higher Education Should Be Achievable

Policymakers can help working adult learners achieve by opening channels to competency-based education and quality short-term training programs.

Students at traditional universities are often held to a cadence of coursework guided by semesters, increasing the time and cost of completion rather than allowing learners to progress at their own pace. This particularly disadvantages working adult learners, for whom time is at a premium. Flexible learning modalities, such as short-term programs and competency-based education (CBE), help working adult learners move through education more rapidly.

Short-Term Learning

The popularity of short-term learning has exploded in the 21st century, with more than 500,000 credentials earned in 2018 alone.³² Generally, these programs grant credit or noncredit certificates or credentials in less than one year. They can be especially attractive to rising and stranded talent, who may lack the time or financial resources to complete a bachelor's degree. Stranded talent, who already have college degrees, may seek short-term certification to reskill or upskill without starting a completely new program.

While short-term programs are abundant, program outcomes are mixed. Existing studies find that some short-term programs are more beneficial than others and that some groups of learners earn higher incomes and find greater career success.³³ Suggestions for improving the success rates of short-term programs include engaging local employers in curriculum development, incorporating workforce experience into programs, and prioritizing programs that align with in-demand jobs.³⁴ Credentials should also be

stackable (built into other degree requirements) and portable (recognized at other institutions and in other states).³⁵ Policymakers need to create pathways that bring educators and employers



Learner Profile

Jillene VanNostrand

Maryland
B.S. Cybersecurity and
Information Assurance
MBA Information
Technology Management

While studying Arabic as a linguist in the U.S. Army, Jillene developed a love for protecting others and learning. After 18 years as a stay-at-home mom to five children, she enrolled at WGU, where she applied her skills, passions, and life experience.

It only took Jillene nine months to earn her bachelor's degree, and she recently received an MBA in Information Technology Management. As a participant in the Cybersecurity Talent Initiative, Jillene is currently employed in a two-year job placement with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

WGU's competency-based program allowed Jillene to move at her own speed, and she attained short-term industry certifications while receiving her degrees. "The ability to customize my pace, and that flexibility that WGU offers has been really instrumental in my success," she said.

together to develop programs that have the most potential to improve lives.

Short-term programs are often seen as an affordable alternative to degree-length programs. However, students enrolled in programs less than 15 weeks long are currently ineligible for Pell Grants.³⁶ This means that Pell funding will not cover tuition or other associated costs, such as tools, transportation, and fees.³⁷ Policymakers should improve affordability by developing other funding options for short-term funding, such as state funds and privately funded scholarships and grants. States and counties should also reevaluate their guidelines for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to ensure that these funds can support all eligible students in programs that lead to resilient career opportunities. Policymakers should also support federal legislation expanding Pell Grant eligibility to include short-term skills and job training.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE) measures skills and learning rather than time spent in a classroom. Working adult learners can progress through courses as soon as they can prove they've mastered the material rather than advancing only when the semester or term ends. If a student can learn faster, spend more time on schoolwork, or

lean on the knowledge they already have from previous work or school experience, they can accelerate through their courses.

Through this educational model, working adult learners can apply their life and college experiences to benefit them in their postsecondary journey. Policies that acknowledge competencies and knowledge already gained can save learners time and money.

This flexibility of CBE—with floating start and end dates and learners moving at the pace that works for them—makes it particularly advantageous to those balancing education with other priorities. However, that same flexibility means that CBE is frequently misunderstood and disadvantaged by outdated laws and institutional practices that focus on time instead of skills.

For example, increased credit articulation agreements and other public policy levers extending digitally across state lines can help learners gain and retain relevant credit for their time, effort, and cost. Many states have adopted laws and policies that require statewide transferability of lower-division courses and guaranteed transfer of associate degrees among public institutions within the state.

Policy Recommendations in Action

Improve the affordability of short-term programs by offering aid and scholarships.

Funding for higher education often focuses on programs that terminate with a degree. However, short-term programs can propel students toward career success or a future degree. Policymakers should expand state aid funding to include these programs.

- **Delaware's** Student Excellence Equals Degree (SEED) Scholarship was expanded to include adult learners and students receiving workforce training certificates. The SEED+ program offers free tuition to students in "credit and non-credit programs leading to the award of a recognized academic credential or associate degree," including short-term certificates.³⁸
- **Tennessee** designed a competency-based training program that provides upskilling opportunities for direct care staff in healthcare with valuable short-term credentials embedded. The Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect Funds help keep costs low for working adult learners.³⁹

Develop quality short-term programs that provide training for in-demand professions.

FastForward is hosted through **Virginia's** community colleges and offers short-term certifications and credentials in 40 high-demand industries. Since its inception in 2016,

more than 32,700 credentials have been awarded, and learners have increased their take-home pay by an average of 55%.⁴⁰

Improve credential portability and transparency.

Credential Engine is a nonprofit organization focused on creating "a transparent credential marketplace" that benefits individuals seeking credentials, institutions providing credentials, and decision-makers crafting policies for credential development.⁴¹ Credential Engine has worked with 29 states, two regions, and several nonprofit organizations to increase credential transparency nationwide.⁴² One of Credential Engine's collaborators is the Open Skills Network (OSN), which partners with WGU in developing and sharing skills libraries that can be used when creating quality credentials.

Improve transfer pathways for competency-based education.

At least 31 states have policies requiring a transferable core of lower-division courses and statewide guaranteed transfer of an associate degree.⁴³ Still, not all states have statewide participation in their articulation or transfer policies, and even fewer have been enacted for competency-based education. In 2022, **Louisiana** SB 261 was one of the first to develop statewide transfer agreements for competency-based and prior learning assessments.⁴⁴

WGU in Action

WGU has provided general education courses through competency-based education for 18 years. We pioneered CBE to help working adult learners earn a degree to reach their career goals. We remain the only institution offering competency-based degrees at scale, creating a model other colleges and universities are increasingly striving to replicate. Learners progress through courses as soon as they can prove they've mastered the material, rather than advancing only when the semester or term ends. If a student can learn faster, spend more time on schoolwork, or lean on the knowledge they already have from previous work or school experience, they can accelerate through their courses. With 24/7 access to online learning resources, students embark on a learning journey tailored exactly to where their knowledge currently is—and where it needs to be.

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>.