



# Success Strategies for Adult Students



GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION

# Executive Summary

The road to a postsecondary credential is not easy for any student, but **adult students face a particular set of** real and perceived challenges that make enrollment and persistence especially difficult.

- Work and family obligations
- Affordability
- Awareness of available postsecondary pathways
- Self-confidence

Fortunately, many schools and organizations are attuned to the differences between an adult student and their younger peers and have developed effective practices to support their achievement of a credential.

In this Issue Brief the staff at Greater Texas Foundation have compiled **over 20 resources** to help readers understand the adult college student, their needs and challenges, and successful strategies to help them achieve postsecondary success. We've also highlighted the work of some of our grantee partners who support adult learners.





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# Introduction

Postsecondary credentials are the gateway to living-wage careers and economic prosperity for communities. **Conservative estimates project that by 2030, 62% of Texas jobs will require education beyond high school<sup>1</sup>. In testimony to the Texas Legislature, the Commissioner of Higher Education, Harrison Keller, asserted that 92% of all new job postings in Texas require a postsecondary credential.** Yet in Texas, 40.6% of adults hold an associate degree or higher, leaving 11.4 million adults in the state with no postsecondary degree.<sup>2</sup>

The need to increase the number of adults with a postsecondary credential is urgent. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's updated strategic plan, *Building a Talent Strong Texas (2022)*, recognized the need for an adult learner focus by expanding attainment goals to include a specific goal around adults 35-64. The new strategic plan also calls for inclusion of a broader array of credentials, some of which have not previously been tracked.

Adult students face distinct challenges and barriers to postsecondary success compared to their younger peers and warrant tailored support services and structures to be successful in completing their credential. There are myriad efforts across the country to better understand and support this student population. This brief synthesizes existing information, highlights key resources, and points to proven solutions to support adult student success within the Texas context.

## Definition

The term "adult students" can vary in meaning but in this brief, we will use the term "adult" to mean anyone over the age of 25 and "adult student" to mean any person over the age of 25 enrolled in higher education.

Adult students are far from a monolithic group with a wide variety of life experiences and intersecting identities. Adult students may also identify as student veterans, student parents, working students, and part-time students.

These resources provide specific details on these student groups and how to support them:

Student Veterans - ["Veterans without Degrees" Strada](#); ["Informing Improved Recognition of Military Learning" Lumina](#)

Student Parents - ["Costs and Finding Childcare" The Education Trust](#)

Part-Time Students - ["Part-Time Students Must Be a Full-Time Priority" Complete College America](#)





# Adult Students in Texas: The Trends

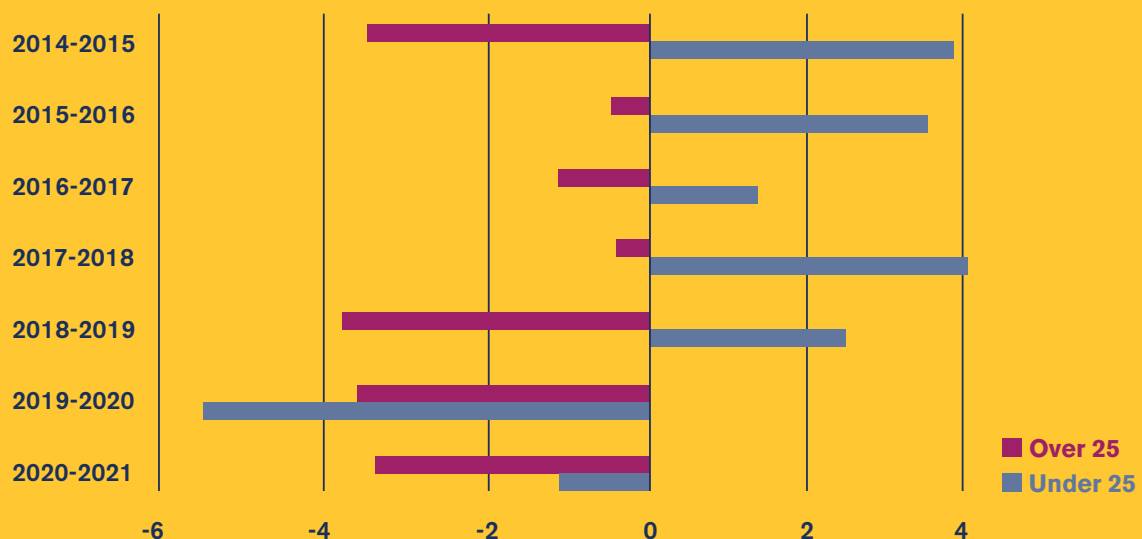
**The total number of adult students enrolled and their representative share of higher education enrollment has steadily decreased in Texas over the last 8 years.**

According to data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, in 2014, 420,354 students over the age of 25 were enrolled in Texas colleges and universities, accounting for 31 percent of total enrollment. The number of adult students enrolled has declined in every subsequent year while the number of students under the age of 25 grew each year until 2019.

As a result, there were only 357,157 adult students enrolled in Texas colleges and universities in the Fall 2021 semester, representing 26% of total enrollment. 45% of these students were enrolled at a public two-year institution.

All data in this section pulled from [THECB's Accountability System](#)

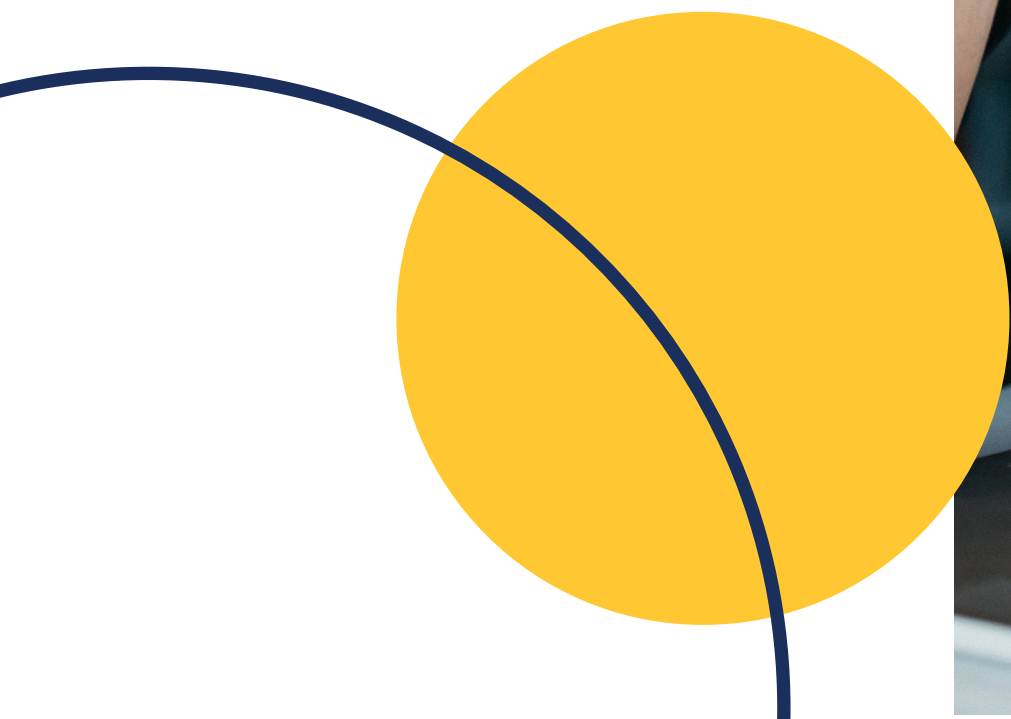
Percent Change in Enrollment at  
Texas Institutions by Age



The number of students over 25 enrolled in Texas colleges and universities fell by 3.6% from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 (compared to 5.4% for students under age 25), representing 19% of the total enrollment decline as a result of the first year of the pandemic. From Fall 2020 to Fall 2021, however, adult students represented 51% of the total enrollment decline, decreasing by an additional 3.3% compared to a drop of 1.1% for students under age 25.

In addition to enrollment challenges adult students face, they also face challenges in persisting to postsecondary credential completion. The National Student Clearinghouse estimates that there are 1,101,039 Texans over the age of 25 with some college credit but no degree.

**These data show a trend of decreasing engagement in Texas higher education for adults over the age of 25.**





# Barriers to Engagement

The road to a postsecondary credential is not easy for any student, but adult students face a particular set of challenges that colleges and universities must address to support students from enrollment to graduation. Work and family obligations, affordability, awareness of available postsecondary pathways, and the need to build confidence can all create real and perceived barriers for adult students who pursue postsecondary credentials. **Greater Texas Foundation recommends these resources for better understanding the barriers experienced by adult students.**

*“The most common reason cited for stopping out was difficulty balancing school and work at the same time”*

“Some College No Degree: How individuals who attend and don’t graduate feel about education” Strada

*“Despite the great interest in free college tuition programs to help Americans attain postsecondary credentials, many free college programs and state legislative proposals restrict eligibility to recent high school graduates, thus excluding older aspiring students”*

“Free College Tuition Programs for Adults” AIR

*“Nearly half of adults who responded to a national survey said self-doubt is one of the largest challenges they would face if they enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program. Self-doubt was one of the top three challenges respondents cited, below time and above cost”*

“Survey: Self-Doubt Is a Barrier to College” Inside Higher Ed

*“Fewer than 1 in 3 adults without degrees say they understand available career pathways, valuable skills, and details about potential education programs ‘very well’”*

“Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education Survey” Strada

# Strategies to Support Adult Learners

## #1 Target Recruitment and Information Sharing

Given the unique barriers adult students face in pursuing and completing postsecondary credentials, they merit specialized support structures and services. The following sections describe key strategies and examples of supporting adult students to and through postsecondary education.

With pressing work and family obligations, potential adult students may struggle to see themselves as part of a campus built for the “traditional-age” full-time residential student. To increase access to postsecondary for adult students, institutions of higher education will need to adapt and tailor recruitment and enrollment practices to the unique circumstances of adult students.

For recommended strategies to recruit and enroll adult students, please see Mathematica’s Education Issue Brief,

[“From Outreach to Enrollment: Strategies to Engage Adults in Education Beyond High School”](#)

## Partner Spotlight

### **Combined Arms**

Information on available programming and logistics for enrollment must be clear and direct to engage busy potential adult students. [Combined Arms](#) is a national nonprofit organization focused on improving the quality of life for veterans and military families through innovative technology solutions.

In 2020, Greater Texas Foundation [awarded a grant](#) to Combined Arms to support the Rural Veteran Support Initiative. The pilot project developed a one-stop-shop app to connect veterans living in rural areas to over 177 best in class education service providers with comprehensive information on educational pathways available and how to access them. Clients who used the app rated it with 4.76 stars out of 5 and 65% of those who used the app ended up applying for or enrolling in a postsecondary credential program.



## #2 Tailor Support Services

Because of the high opportunity cost for adults to pursue postsecondary credentials, adult students in particular need support services that help them navigate credential programs in an affordable and efficient manner. High-quality, personalized advising and access to other wraparound supports is critical to ensuring that adult students stay on track to complete credentials.

### Research from Strada Education Network found the following:

*“Guidance and coaching are essential to addressing the challenges many adult learners experience with self-doubt and a lack of access to clear information. Slightly more than half of adults who say they intend to enroll in community college nationwide would be the first generation in their families to complete college (58 percent). Almost half of adults fear they won’t be successful students, or that they have been out of school for too long. Few adults—less than a third—feel that they have a very good understanding of critical aspects of the educational journey, like what skills they should learn, which program they should attend, and how long a program would take.”*

“Powering Purpose: Invest now in community colleges to fuel economic opportunity” Strada





## Partner Spotlight

### ***Western Governor's University***

In summer of 2022, Greater Texas Foundation awarded a grant to Western Governor's University to expand their recruitment and support services to potential adult students living in rural West Texas.

The project focuses on identifying, locating, and re-engaging adults who have some college credit but no degree. WGU's communications campaign uses multiple platforms to reach a diverse group of potential adult students. All prospective students are assigned an Enrollment Counselor to guide them through the application and enrollment processes. For students who may need additional support before engaging in college-level coursework, Enrollment Counselors refer students to WGU Academy to provide an on-ramp to succeed in postsecondary education.





### #3 Ensure Flexibility

Many adult students enrolled in higher education have competing work and family responsibilities that place very real boundaries on when and where they can engage in their coursework. Recent data suggests that of adult students enrolled in community colleges across the country, more than half work full time and a similar percentage are primary caregivers for children.<sup>3</sup>

A survey administered to adult students found, “adult learners place a high priority on course flexibility. They want courses to fit with their life and work schedules and options when it comes to course delivery.”<sup>4</sup> Across all students enrolled at both two-year and four-year institutions, adult learners ranked availability of programs and convenient time and place of course offerings as the primary considerations for enrollment. **Flexible pacing and time required to complete the program were particularly important to adults pursuing four-year degrees.**

Ensuring flexible course scheduling options offered in a variety of modalities across academic pathways is critical to serving adult learners.



## **#4 Simplify Pathways and Time to Degree**

Adult learners navigating higher education programs are often faced with systemic inefficiencies. Particularly for students re-entering higher education with some credit, “lack of alignment and coordination across institutions” often results in loss of credit.<sup>5</sup> A national study found almost half of transfer students’ credits were not applied at their new institution.<sup>6</sup> In the face of these widespread challenges, many adult students enter or reenter higher education unaware of the time and cost to earn a degree.

A survey of adult students found that on average, adults who are considering enrolling in an educational program underestimated the average time to complete an associate degree by almost a year and the average cost by about \$3,000.<sup>7</sup> Increasing alignment between institutions of higher education and streamlining transfer processes across state systems is critical to helping all students, and adults with some credit and no degree, in particular, to complete credentials in a timely and efficient manner.



# Partner Spotlight

## **Texas Association of Community Colleges**

“The Texas Success Center, a member of the national Student Success Center Network, designs and manages the coherent, statewide framework for action and supports 50 community college districts in the state as they evaluate, align and integrate their work to increase student success through Texas Pathways.

This comprehensive reform strategy reflects the Texas Association of Community Colleges’ dedication to socioeconomic mobility through career-focused postsecondary success. The association founded the Texas Success Center to provide statewide coordination of student success strategies and to tighten the linkages between practice, research, and policy.

All Texas community colleges have committed to Texas Pathways to implement guided pathways at scale. The Texas Success Center supports all community colleges as they build capacity to implement and scale practices to help more students earn meaningful credentials, transfer to universities with no loss of credit, and gain employment in careers with value in the labor market.”



Alternative credentialing and instructional approaches, such as prior learning assessments (PLA) and competency-based education (CBE), can be especially beneficial to adult students seeking to complete a credential.

These practices place the focus on the outcomes of learning and competency and allow for variation in time to completion between students, rather than the traditional model of education that measures learning through fixed time variables such as the credit hour. This shift rewards adults with significant work experience to move quickly through material they have mastered outside of the classroom while at the same time offers flexibility to students who may need additional time or support to become competent in the material.

## Definitions

Prior learning assessment – “Prior learning assessment policies allow students to earn college credit for knowledge and experience gained outside of a classroom, which can accelerate their time to graduation.” (ESC 2018)

Competency-based education – “Offers a flexible way for students to earn credit based on demonstration of subject-matter knowledge learned either through personalized guided instruction or examinations based on mastery of competencies.” (Anderson 2017)

## Resources

[“Policy Snapshot: Competency-Based Education”](#)  
[Education Commission of the States](#)

[“Skills and Competency-Based Approaches”](#) JFF

[Students First: Equity, Access, and Opportunity in Higher Education](#), Paul Leblanc



# Partner Spotlight

## TSTC

With support from [Greater Texas Foundation](#), [Texas State Technical College \(TSTC\)](#) is piloting several technical training programs through performance-based education (PBE) models. The programs will allow students to receive credit for prior life and learning experience, accelerate through their technical education based on demonstrated mastery of key competencies, and graduate with a comprehensive record of their skills and knowledge.

# Partner Spotlight

## C-BEN

In partnership with [Greater Texas Foundation](#), the [Competency-Based Education Network \(C-BEN\)](#) launched the Texas CBE Design Collaboratory to support a cohort of public universities across the state in planning and developing competency-based education programs leading to high-wage careers.

The program offers personalized technical assistance to each institution and establishes a community of practice to engage institutions in the work. In the summer of 2022, [Greater Texas Foundation awarded a second grant](#) to C-BEN to provide institutions the opportunity to implement their CBE pathways.

# Partner Spotlight

## TAMU-Commerce

With [support from Greater Texas Foundation](#), [Texas A&M-Commerce](#) is designing two innovative competency-based pathways particularly geared toward learners with prior credits or certifications. In addition to providing these new pathways, a central component of the project also establishes academic success teams to guide students enrolled in these programs to efficient completion of a credential.

Reflecting on lessons learned from this project, a representative noted, “Establishing relationships is essential to academic success. Internally, having an Advisor and Undergraduate Enrollment specialist that can address student concerns quickly is important, especially for adult learners who may be re-joining the university after many years away, and/or after an initial experience that may not have been favorable.”





## #5 Provide Opportunities to Earn and Learn and Ensure Workforce Alignment

Pursuing a postsecondary credential presents a trade-off for all students, however adult students often juggle significant work and family obligations that increase the opportunity cost of attending college.

To support these students and ensure their time is well spent, higher education providers and employers can work together to provide efficient pathways that are aligned to workforce needs with opportunities to participate in work-based learning along the way.

### Relevant Resources

According to a Strada report, the most common pathway back to school for individuals with some college and no degree was through employers. As such, “strategies to meet education attainment goals will be more effective as they integrate employers.”

[Read more from Strada.](#)

Increasing workforce alignment and work-based learning opportunities also has clear advantages for employers. A report from JFF found, “employers say that college graduates lack proficiency in skills necessary to succeed in the workplace...Research shows that incorporating work-based learning into education and workforce development programs can address this job readiness and career advancement conundrum.”

[Read more from JFF.](#)

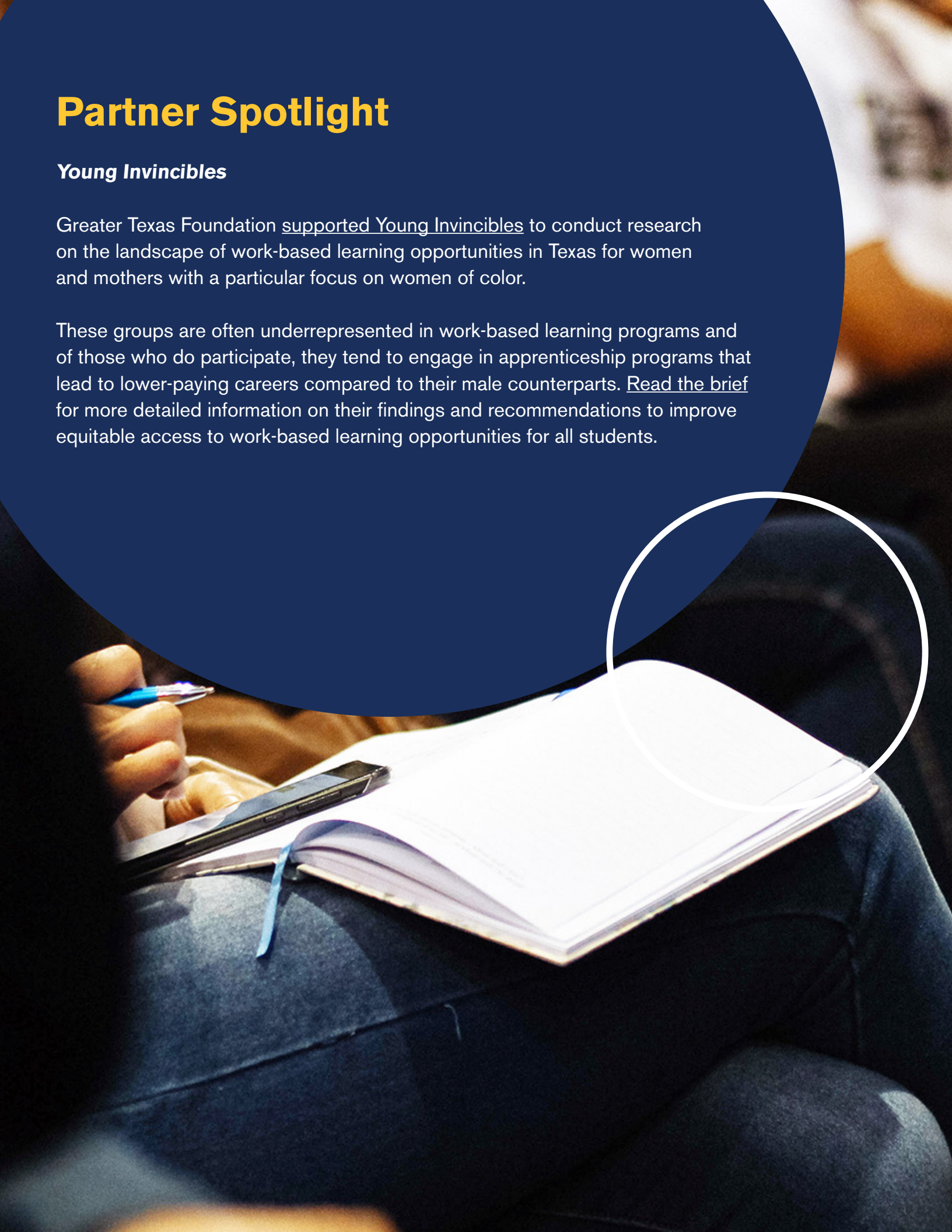


# Partner Spotlight

## *Young Invincibles*

Greater Texas Foundation supported Young Invincibles to conduct research on the landscape of work-based learning opportunities in Texas for women and mothers with a particular focus on women of color.

These groups are often underrepresented in work-based learning programs and of those who do participate, they tend to engage in apprenticeship programs that lead to lower-paying careers compared to their male counterparts. [Read the brief](#) for more detailed information on their findings and recommendations to improve equitable access to work-based learning opportunities for all students.





## #6 Support Community Colleges

Community colleges are critical engines for serving adult students. In Texas, 45% of adult students enrolled in postsecondary education do so at community colleges.<sup>8</sup> Nationally, the average age of community college students is 28.<sup>9</sup> Despite suffering a significant enrollment loss during the pandemic, the community college sector has maintained popularity among adults.

Survey data shows that 1.3 million adults in Texas are interested in enrolling in a community college.<sup>10</sup> Of those, “81% are people of color and 57% are parenting.”<sup>11</sup> Supporting community colleges is critical to provide adults with equitable access to postsecondary credentials. [Read more from Strada.](#)







## Goal

**By 2030, 60% of adults in Texas will obtain a postsecondary credential of value**

# Texas Policy Interventions

The state of Texas has already implemented several policy interventions to support adult students. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's new strategic plan, *Building a Talent Strong Texas*, set a statewide goal for credential attainment among adults. By 2030, the state's goal is to have 60% of Texans aged 25-64 obtain a postsecondary credential of value. In 2021, the Texas State legislature passed several measures in support of adult postsecondary education.

The legislature appropriated \$15 million to support the [Texas Reskilling and Upskilling through Education \(TRUE\) Grant Program](#) with the goal to "build a talent-strong Texas through the creation, expansion, or redesign of workforce education and training programs in high-demand occupations." During the same legislative session, policy makers also approved the formation of the [Texas Commission on Community College Finance](#). This commission provided several recommendations on funding the state's community colleges that will impact how effectively adult students are served. The recommendations have been incorporated in a set of priority bills being considered in the 88th Legislature.



## *More Opportunities to Learn*

- The Education Commission of the States outlined ways to re-engage adults with some college credit but no credential in its paper [“Promising Practices: State Innovations for Near-Completers”](#)
- JFF described steps that state policy makers can take to close equity gaps and drive economic advancement for all in their brief [“Accelerated and Efficient Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials With Labor Market Value”](#)
- The Texas Commission on Community College Finance issued these recommendations to the Texas State Legislature:
  - State funding for outcomes
    - Base state funding for community colleges on measurable outcomes, including number of students obtaining credentials of value and number of students who transfer to four-year universities
  - Affordability for students
    - Increase financial aid for community college students, including those enrolled in dual credit, and increase paid work-based learning opportunities
  - Investments in college capacity
    - Provide opportunities for community colleges to improve workforce alignment, strengthen inter-institutional partnerships, and enhance stackable credential programs



# Conclusion

Adults looking to further their postsecondary education are essential to the future of the Texas workforce. Without their life-experience and their talent, the state will not meet its economic goals. Yet without intentional, tailored supports for this population, the opportunity cost of pursuing a postsecondary credential may be too high for some.

Investing in adult learners is likely to have significant returns for individuals and the state by filling workforce needs, advancing equity, and improving quality of life.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. 2022.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [US Census Bureau. 2021.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Ruffalo Noel Levitz. 2016. "2015-2016 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [JFF. "Accelerated and Efficient Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials With Labor Market Value."](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [St. Amour, Madeline. 2020. "Survey: Self-Doubt is a Barrier to College."](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Texas Higher Education Accountability System.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Leavitt, Melissa, Mo McKenna, Seth Reichlin, and Janet Salm. "Powering Purpose: Spotlight Texas." Strada Institute.](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Ibid.](#)





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