



Comprehensive Student Supports Help Adult Learners Earn Non-Degree Credentials

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Summary

Education and training beyond high school is increasingly critical to labor market success, yet more than half of Americans between the ages of 25 and 64 do not hold a postsecondary credential of any kind. Today's students – especially adults with some college experience but no credential, and adults without any college experience at all – face significant barriers to completing postsecondary credentials, including “non-academic” issues like balancing study with work, childcare, and other life responsibilities; financial pressures; and personal and familial health needs. Addressing these challenges is essential if colleges want to serve adult learners effectively.

This report examines the impact of comprehensive support services for adults on the receipt of non-degree credentials, a growing option for college students including credit and non-credit certificates that can be completed within two years and that have demonstrated labor market value. Comprehensive student supports emphasize the integration and enhancement of multiple academic and personal support services into a seamless, timely, and individualized experience for every student. Drawing on results from four independent studies involving 35 community and technical colleges across five states, results suggest:

- Receiving student supports is associated with increased credential attainment and may be especially beneficial in helping adults complete longer-term non-degree credentials;
- Support services benefit adults enrolled in both healthcare (largely female-dominant) and manufacturing (largely male-dominant) programs; and
- Providing supports in the areas of career and employment services and in higher dosages (i.e., more contact) are associated with larger impacts on credential attainment. Providing supports in-class can reach more students and have large demonstrated impacts on attainment.

Introduction

According to Lumina Foundation’s 2019 *A Stronger Nation* report, more than half of adults between the ages of 25 and 64 do not hold a postsecondary credential of any kind, which hinders their labor market opportunities.² Nearly 2 million credential-seeking undergraduates are enrolled in sub-baccalaureate certificate programs, and a larger share of adults 25 years of age and older are enrolled in occupational certificate programs compared with traditional-aged students.³ Thus, focusing on sub-baccalaureate certificates, and identifying and scaling strategies that help adults earn non-degree credentials, can impact a large number of adult learners and help meet Lumina’s goal—that 60 percent of adults hold some type of postsecondary credential.

Emerging evaluative evidence from demonstration projects suggests that providing comprehensive supports can be an effective strategy to help adults earn postsecondary credentials. Often referred to as wraparound services or holistic student supports, this approach emphasizes the integration and enhancement of multiple academic and personal support services into a seamless, timely, and individualized experience for every student.⁴

A recent evaluation of the Accelerating CTE Project at four colleges between 2015-2018 found that providing comprehensive student supports – such as career guidance, case management, and success coaching – along with team-teaching and supplemental instruction for students increased credential attainment rates. Students who received a package of academic and non-academic supports associated with these career and technical education pathways were more likely to earn two or more credentials.⁵

A limited number of experimental studies likewise suggest that proactive and individualized coaching, an important component of many colleges’ approach to delivering comprehensive supports, can boost student retention and persistence.⁶ Comprehensive student supports are important because they address challenges that go beyond academic preparedness, such as balancing study with work, childcare, and other life responsibilities; financial pressures; personal health needs; and uncertainty regarding career goals and how to prepare and search for employment.⁷ When designed effectively, comprehensive supports are delivered in a cohesive manner that minimizes student perceptions of “campus runaround,” the concept that a student must go to various offices or individuals on campus—often retelling their story—to get the support they need; a joint study by RNL and Lumina Foundation suggests that adult learners are more likely than traditional-aged college students to cite campus runaround as a challenge.⁸

Between 2011 and 2018, the U.S. Department of Labor invested \$2 billion to fund the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program, which supported colleges across the country to design and implement innovative strategies to improve adult learners’ completion of “non-degree credentials,” a broad category that includes certificates and technical diplomas that can be completed in two years or less. This brief summarizes results from four independent analyses providing evidence on the impact of student supports on the completion of non-degree credentials among a sample of adults aged 25-64 who had not earned any prior postsecondary credential. Analysis was conducted with financial support from Lumina Foundation and was coordinated by DVP-PRAXIS LTD. An earlier brief developed through this project ([July 2019](#)), also based on independent analyses by researchers who had been third-party evaluators on various TAACCCT initiatives, found that non-degree credentials can have significant and positive labor market outcomes for adult learners.

This brief summarizes results from four independent studies providing evidence on the impact of comprehensive student supports on the completion of non-degree credentials among a sample of adults aged 25-64 who had not earned any prior postsecondary credential. The supply of non-degree credentials is increasing,⁹ and mounting evidence suggests many non-degree credentials can pay off in the labor market.¹⁰ **The findings across the studies summarized in this brief – all deriving from rigorous quasi-experimental analyses of administrative data at public two-year colleges – point to substantial improvements in non-degree credential completion rates for adults receiving college-provided support services.**

With support from Lumina Foundation and coordination by DVP-PRAXIS LTD, researchers conducted analyses of data deriving from four separate TAACCCT evaluations to examine the potential for comprehensive student supports to improve attainment of non-degree credentials for adult learners (see box on page 1 for more information on TAACCCT). These consortium-led initiatives – which were focused on the fields of health and manufacturing – all implemented academic and non-academic student supports as a key strategy to improve retention and credential completion outcomes for their students. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, healthcare and manufacturing programs enroll 60 percent of all credential-seeking undergraduates pursuing a non-degree occupational certificate at Title IV eligible postsecondary institutions.¹¹ Thus, the evidence presented in this brief should resonate with a substantial number of students, practitioners, and policymakers who need to understand whether and how student supports can be a key strategy for completion of this growing category of sub-baccalaureate credentials.

Non-degree credentials are a broad category of postsecondary credentials that includes credit-bearing certificates as well as non-credit certificates, occupational and professional licenses, and industry certifications.

This brief focuses on non-degree credentials awarded within community and technical colleges that include certificates and other college-issued credentials that can be either credit-bearing or non-credit, and that can be awarded within two years. Two-year associates degrees, even those that are vocationally focused, are not included in the definition of non-degree credentials.

Table 1: Types of Student Supports

TAACCCT Initiatives & States Included in Analyses		Examples of Supports
Health	Advancing Careers and Training (ACT) for Healthcare – Wisconsin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *enhanced classroom instruction *tutoring and test preparation *personal counseling *case management *study skills workshops *job search and placement
	Health Professions Pathways (H2P) – Minnesota, Ohio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *proactive/intrusive advising *supplemental instruction *study skills workshops *career and employment services *financial literacy
Manufacturing	Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) – Michigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *academic advising *intrusive case management *career coaching *referrals for supportive services
	MoManufacturing WINS (MMW) – Missouri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *contextualized basic skills support *intrusive advising *personalized orientation *career coaching and job placement

As shown in Table 1, the types of student supports provided by colleges spanned a variety of approaches. Practitioners and evaluators described these supports as “intrusive advising,” “holistic supports,” and “enhanced supports.” On average across the four studies, nearly 60 percent of adult participants received at least one academic or non-academic support.

The range and delivery of student supports varied across these initiatives and among colleges within each state, though several common features were incorporated across these institutions. For example, student supports were academic and non-academic, and were provided both within the classroom as an enhancement to instruction and out of the classroom as a [mostly] optional suite of 1:1 supports or group workshops. In almost all cases, colleges provided career supports that included advising, job search and job placement. Lastly, several colleges sought to connect and refer students to non-academic supports provided by state workforce and human services agencies or non-profits that provided childcare, transportation or housing resources. The bottom-line is that **student supports – while not always mandatory or required – reflected an understanding that adults enrolling in postsecondary education and training programs needed a suite of supports to be successful**, and included a proactive college staff who encouraged them to take advantage of these supports as a strategy to complete their programs.

Data and Methods

Data used in the analyses are from administrative records from 35 postsecondary institutions across five states. For all studies, the analytical samples were restricted to students aged 25-64 who had some postsecondary experience but no credential or who had never attended college previously.¹²

As shown in Table 2, the average age of adults in these samples ranged from 35 to 40, with students in health programs being predominantly women and slightly younger compared with manufacturing programs that served mostly men. With the exception of the study conducted in Wisconsin (ACT), about one-third of students in the samples were African-American or Hispanic. A majority of students were working when they enrolled in these programs with the exception of Missouri where most students were unemployed at the start of their programs.

Evaluators used rigorous analytic approaches to examine the impact of support services on completion of non-degree credentials of varying lengths and produced papers that provide more detailed analyses from their respective datasets.¹³

Each study is quasi-experimental and used concurrent samples of comparison group students (i.e. *not* pre-post analyses) along with matching techniques (Propensity Score Matching, Augmented Inverse Probability Weighting, and/or Inverse Probability Weighting) that control for a host of confounding factors and meet moderate causal evidence standards as defined by the Clearinghouse of Labor Evaluation and Research. For the quasi-experimental analyses, the “treatment” was operationalized as receipt of at least one student support.

Table 2: Adult Learner Demographics

	Health		Manufacturing	
	ACT	H2P	M-CAM	MMW
Average age at enrollment	35	36	38	40
% Female	88%	82%	17%	14%
% White	80%	64%	63%	61%
% African-American	6%	31%	29%	28%
% Hispanic	6%	1%	10%	2%
% Working Student	74%	64%	51%	38%

Results

Overall, findings across studies point to large impacts for adults receiving support services on non-degree credential completion. Results from quasi-experimental models from each of the four studies are summarized in Figure 1 on page 4.

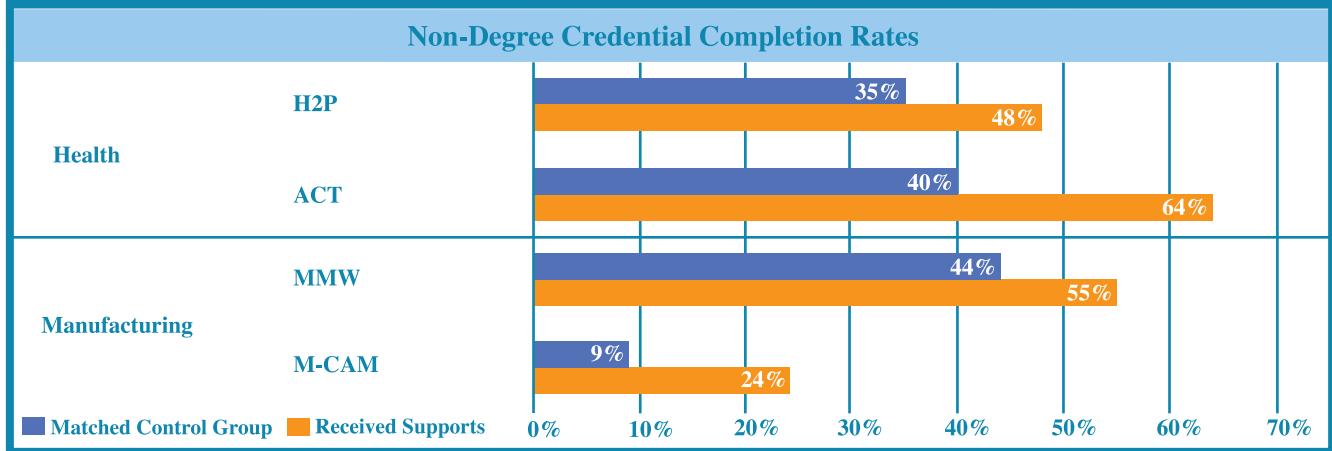
- **Adult learners who receive student supports complete non-degree credentials at significantly higher rates.**

Estimates from quasi-experimental models—which control for a host of confounding factors—point to substantial impacts on non-degree credential completion for adult learners receiving student supports. Across the four studies, adults receiving at least one type of student support experienced a boost in completion rates that ranged from 11 to 24 percentage points.

- **Comprehensive supports appear to benefit adult learners pursuing postsecondary credentials in both healthcare and manufacturing programs.**

Overall results show significant gains in non-degree credential attainment in both healthcare and manufacturing programs, ranging between 13 and 24 percentage points in the women-dominant healthcare sector and between 11 and 15 percentage points in the male-dominant manufacturing sector.

Figure 1: Non-Degree Credential Completion Rates, by Receipt of Support Services



**All differences in completion rate between treatment and control significant at $p < .05$. The M-CAM sample was restricted to students pursuing credentials that required at least six months to complete, which explains overall lower completion rates for this evaluation.*

- **Exploratory analyses point to the benefits of specific types or modes of student supports, and to the importance of dosage.**

Several evaluators conducted supplementary analyses to explore the benefits of particular types of student supports or modes of support delivery – the details of which are available in each respective report. For example, the Wisconsin health study (ACT) found substantial impacts on completion for the subset of adult learners who received supports delivered in-class; supports delivered within classrooms are available to all students at a time and place they are already present compared with offering supports outside of class that students access voluntarily. The H2P study conducted regression analyses to examine the benefits of a variety of support service types and found that career services and employment services had particularly large impacts on non-degree credential completion. Finally, the M-CAM study included analysis to explore the relationship between frequency of support receipt and credential completion and found that dosage matters—students receiving more supports were more likely to complete a non-degree credential.

- **Support services may be especially important in helping adult learners complete non-degree credentials that are longer in length.**

In sensitivity analyses, several evaluators explored impacts of student supports on completion of non-degree credentials that require at least six months but less than two years to complete (see each respective report for more details). Findings suggest that, for adult learners, receipt of student supports is associated with an especially large percent increase in the likelihood of completing these longer-term credentials. A companion report¹⁴ echoes other research suggesting that non-degree credentials that require at least six months to complete have a substantially larger payoff in the labor market in terms of quarterly earnings, compared to credentials that can be completed in less than six months.

Conclusion

Lumina Foundation has identified a goal to ensure that 60 percent of Americans aged 25 to 64 hold a quality postsecondary credential. Findings from our earlier brief suggest that non-degree credentials earned within public two-year colleges—specifically, credit and non-credit certificates and other college-issued credentials that can be earned in two years or less—can be a promising option for helping to meet this goal.¹⁵

Results from this synthesis of four studies, based on administrative academic records and rigorous quasi-experimental methodology, provide compelling evidence that by providing comprehensive student supports, colleges can help more adult students complete non-degree credentials. Analyses suggest that student supports that addressed both academic and non-academic issues, and that were provided both within the classroom as an enhancement to instruction and out of the classroom through 1:1 supports or group workshops, can result in significant improvements in the percentage of adult learners earning non-degree credentials. These results reinforce the growing research and evaluative evidence pointing to personalized and proactive engagement with students as an effective strategy to increase credential attainment.

In light of these findings demonstrating large impacts of support service receipt on attainment of non-degree credentials, federal and state policies should prioritize and incentivize colleges and universities to expand their provision of supports, which historically has not been an area where colleges have invested heavily. For example, federal grant programs could support the hiring of support services professionals by colleges to support adult learners with an expectation that these roles will be sustained post-grant based on increased retention and completion. A new brief from New America points to the promise of the navigator role in improving outcomes for adult learners by connecting them to a host of academic and non-academic college resources, as well as industry and career networks.¹⁶ In addition, states could incorporate comprehensive supports more explicitly in their outcomes-based funding policies as an incentive for colleges to expand proactive or intrusive coaching and advising supports, especially for adult learners in non-degree programs assessed as high-quality in terms of employment, earnings, and key competencies.¹⁷ Philanthropic organizations can also support these efforts by assisting colleges with operational and evaluative support to further demonstrate the value of comprehensive support services.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation, their officers, or employees.

End Notes

¹ The collection of briefs prepared for this project, including the four on comprehensive support services synthesized in this report, are available at <https://www.dvp-praxis.org/resources/outcomes-and-impact/>

² Lumina Foundation. (2019). A stronger nation report: Learning beyond high school builds American talent. <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#nation>

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16). Table P182 accessed September 11, 2019 at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ctes/tables/p182.asp>. Table P193 accessed September 18, 2019 at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ctes/tables/p193.asp>.

⁴ See for example, Achieving the Dream’s model of holistic student supports: <https://www.achievingthedream.org/resources/initiatives/holistic-student-supports>

⁵ Smith, T., McDonnerl, R.P., Togli, J. & Endel, B. (Spring 2019). Reflections on Accelerating CTE: Final Evaluation Report. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

⁶ Bettinger, E.P., Baker, R. (2014). The Effects of Student Coaching: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Advising. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(1).
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⁸ Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL) & Lumina Foundation. (2019). *2019 National Adult Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

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¹⁰ Dadgar, M., & Trimble, M. J. (2015). Labor market returns to sub-baccalaureate credentials: How much does a community college degree or certificate pay? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(4): 399-418
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¹¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16). Table P182 accessed September 11, 2019 at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ctes/tables/p181.asp>

¹² These populations reflect two of Lumina Foundation’s three opportunity populations, which are the focus of their postsecondary efforts to increase educational attainment.

¹³ The collection of briefs prepared for this project, including the four on comprehensive support services synthesized in this report, are available at <https://www.dvp-praxis.org/resources/outcomes-and-impact/>

¹⁴ Valentine, J.L. & Clay, J. (2019). Non-degree credentials provide value for adults in the labor market. DVP-PRAXIS: Indianapolis, IN.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Love, I. (2019). Navigating the Journey: Encouraging Student Progress through Enhanced Support Services in TAACCCT. New America: Washington, DC.

¹⁷ Duke-Benfield, A.E., Wilson, B., Kaleba, K., & Leventoff, J. (2019). Expanding Opportunities: Defining Quality Non-Degree Credentials for States. National Skills Coalition: Washington, DC.
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