Pathways for Reconnecting Adult Students at Community Colleges

Trends and Takeaways

Background

Since 2011, the U.S. economy added 11.5 million net new jobs for workers with postsecondary education, but only 80,000 jobs for those with a high school diploma or less. Given the differences in the level of education required for jobs, economists predict an additional 16.4 million workers will have to earn a credential by 2025.

In order to meet these demands, states are aiming to increase postsecondary education and skill training among traditionally underrepresented and non-traditional students. Since adult students aged 25-49 comprise nearly one third of enrollment at community colleges, policymakers seek to leverage this group – particularly in Tennessee.

Unfortunately due to COVID-19, attracting and retaining adult students is a difficult task. In fact, adult enrollment decreased by 7% across the nation and 13% in Tennessee. Paired with an already undereducated workforce, this decrease in adult enrollment underscores the need to better understand enrollment patterns.

This report provides a profile of adult students in Tennessee and highlights general trends of their college experience.

Interactive Dashboard

TBR’s Office of Policy & Strategy created an interactive dashboard for colleges to contextualize their adult student population (age 25+).

Using data from 2010 to present, these dashboards answer a variety of questions. Some questions include:

1. Overtime, how many adult students were enrolled at my college?
2. What programs of study do most adult students of color enroll in at my college?
3. What percentage of adult students complete fully online courses at my college?

Key Takeaways

Since 2010, the total number of adult students enrolled per term decreased – particularly for continuing students.

In Fall 2010, 23,763 continuing adult students were enrolled in colleges across the state compared to 14,963 in Fall 2019. However, from Fall 2010 to Fall 2019, the number of new adult enrollees and adults returning after time away remained relatively stagnant. Aside from Motlow State, whose continuing adult students increased from 925 in Fall 2010 to 1,015 in Fall 2019, these findings hold true across all colleges.
Most adult students are Liberal Arts or Health Professions majors.

In Fall 2019, 49% of all adult students were Liberal Arts majors followed by 18% who were Health Professions majors. Additionally, in Fall 2019, 42% of male students were Liberal Arts majors followed by 14% who were Engineering majors. Conversely, 52% of female students were Liberal Arts majors followed by 21% who were Health Professions majors.

A typical adult student is a white, non-Pell female student, 25 – 30 years of age.

In Fall 2019, 69% of adult students were white, 67% were female, 58% were non-Pell recipients, and 41% were between 25 and 30 years of age. However, 71% of new enrollees were Pell recipients compared to 38% of continuing and returning after time away students.

An increasing number of adult students are taking some online or all online courses – particularly in counties surrounding Shelby County, Davidson County, Knox County, and Hamilton County.

In Fall 2019, 60%, 66%, 68%, and 75% of adult students were taking some online or all online courses in Shelby County, Knox County, Davidson County, and Hamilton County, respectively. The surrounding counties also had a significant proportion of adult students who took some online or all online courses. In the counties surrounding Davidson County - Cheatham County, Robertson County, Williamson County, Rutherford County, Wilson County, and Sumner County - 77% of adults took some online or all online courses.

Most of the adult population in Tennessee lacks post-secondary credentials.

According to the 2018 US Census Data, 21% of adults in Tennessee have Some College, No degree. Shelby County has the greatest number of adults with some college but no degree (117,671 adults), followed by Davidson County (74,408 adults). Additionally, 65% of adults – 68% of males and 61% of females – have some college but no degree, are a high school graduate, have a 9th – 12th grade education, or have less than a 9th grade education.