

San Diego & Imperial Community Colleges' Adult Learner Study

INSIGHTS TO STRENGTHEN PRACTICES AND POLICIES

November 2025



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Executive Summary

In 2022, California committed to an ambitious goal: 70% of working-age Californians will earn a postsecondary degree by 2030.¹ Achieving this vision requires greater attention to a growing share of California’s community college population: adult learners—students aged 25 and older who navigate college while balancing work, caregiving, and other life responsibilities.

To provide a regional perspective and help community colleges better understand the experiences of adult learners, the San Diego & Imperial Center of Excellence (COE) surveyed 621 adult learners aged 25 and older who attended one or more regional community colleges. This study examined adult learners’ goals for enrolling, barriers to persistence, needs and essential supports, satisfaction and experiences at community colleges, and employment outcomes. Insights from these findings include:

- ▶ Adult learners balance multiple responsibilities—such as working and caregiving—resulting in scheduling conflicts that delay or stop their studies.
- ▶ Flexible class schedules and accessible course formats are essential for helping adult learners—especially non-completers—persist and complete their educational goals.
- ▶ Although overall satisfaction is high, completers are more likely than non-completers to view their education as a worthwhile investment and to report positive experiences.
- ▶ Adult learners who complete their educational goals not only perceive greater career benefits from their education, but also report higher earnings and stronger alignment between their training and employment.

The recommendations are grounded in the insights from this study and supported by regional and statewide research. Together, they provide community colleges with a deeper understanding of the experiences and needs of adult learners in the region, and colleges are encouraged to use this report as a tool for reflection and planning by examining their own data, engaging in meaningful discussions both within their institutions and across colleges, and conducting ongoing research to make data-informed decisions about adult learners.

¹ “Vision 2030: A Roadmap for California Community Colleges,” California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, September 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/Vision-2030-A-Roadmap-for-California-Community-Colleges.pdf.

Introduction



In 2022, California set the ambitious goal that 70% of working-age Californians will hold a postsecondary degree by 2030.² To help achieve this target, the California Community College Chancellor's Office developed *Vision 2030: A Roadmap for Community Colleges*, a statewide plan to advance equity, access, and success across the community college system.³

Central to this vision are adult learners—defined as individuals aged 25 or older—whose numbers continue to grow across California's community colleges, reflecting both demographic shifts and the need for continued learning.⁴ In the region, adult learners made up half of all students enrolled across the San Diego & Imperial Community Colleges in the 2023–24 academic year.⁵ (See Exhibit 19 in Appendix A: Data Tables for the share of adult learners enrolled by community college).

Vision 2030 calls for colleges to better serve adult learners, particularly those from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups or without prior postsecondary experience. Adult learners represent a key opportunity for both increasing enrollment and achieving the state's workforce and equity goals. Therefore, understanding how to attract, support, and retain these students is critical for institutional and regional progress.

Adult learners differ from traditional students in meaningful ways. Many have prior postsecondary experience and attend part-time, often balancing employment, caregiving, and family responsibilities.⁶ Research shows they face barriers such as negative past experiences or limited awareness of campus resources—factors that hinder persistence and completion.⁷ Supporting them requires an intentional redesign of institutional processes to reflect the realities of their lives. To inform this work, the San Diego & Imperial Center of Excellence (COE) conducted a regional study of adult learners who attended one or more of the 10 San Diego & Imperial Community Colleges.

2 "The California Blueprint," CA Governor's Office, 2022, accessed October 1, 2025, gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Higher-Education-Fact-Sheet.pdf.

3 "Vision 2030: A Roadmap for California Community Colleges," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, September 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/Vision-2030-A-Roadmap-for-California-Community-Colleges.pdf.

4 "Vision 2030: A Roadmap for California Community Colleges," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, September 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/Vision-2030-A-Roadmap-for-California-Community-Colleges.pdf.

5 "General Admit Students at San Diego/Imperial," DataVista, 2023-24, accessed October 1, 2025, datavista.cocco.edu/data_views/single_metric_nsa.

6 "A Closer Look at Adult Learners in California Community Colleges," College Futures Foundation and California Education Lab, September 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, collegefutures.org/download/5257/?tmstvt=1756841503.

7 Ido, O., Harari Paltiel, Y., Carmel, P., Barazani, N. T., Bar-Av, B., & Nissim, M. (2024). "I Want to Prove to Myself That I Can": Motivations and Challenges of Older Learners in Their First Year of Academic Studies. *Creative Education*, 15, 2306-2317. doi.org/10.4236/ce.2024.1511140.

This study examined the following research topics regarding the experiences of adult learners in San Diego & Imperial Community Colleges:

Research Topics

Goals and motivations to enroll

Barriers to persistence

Supports needed to retain

Satisfaction with instruction and services

Employment outcomes



The following sections present the findings of this study, offering a foundational understanding of adult learners in the region and identifying opportunities for colleges to strengthen strategies, policies, and practices that improve their success. The San Diego & Imperial COE encourages the community colleges to build on these insights through continued dialogue across departments, reflection on how each institution is currently supporting adult learners, and action to create stronger systems that support their success. For a details on the study design and methods, refer to Appendix B: Methodology.

Study Overview

A total of 621 respondents who attended a San Diego & Imperial Community College between 2021 and 2024 participated in a quantitative survey. Data collection took place in July and August 2025, and all qualifying participants were adult learners aged 25 or older. Exhibit 1 summarizes the demographic profile of respondents. To view demographics by completion status, refer to Appendix A: Data Tables (Exhibit 20 to Exhibit 23). More details about data collection and analysis are provided in Appendix B: Methodology.

Exhibit 1. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Gender	<i>N</i> =557	Education Level	<i>N</i> =562
Woman	73%	High school graduate or less	9%
Man	24%	Some college credit, no degree	24%
Non-Binary / Self-Describe	2%	Associate degree (AA, AS)	18%
Age	<i>N</i> =552	Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)	31%
25 - 34	40%	Graduate degree (Master's, Ph.D.)	18%
35 - 44	26%	Special Population*	<i>N</i> =543
45 - 54	17%	First-generation college student	52%
55 - 64	13%	Parent to child(ren) under 18 yrs. old	38%
65 and above	4%	Low-income resident	24%
Race/Ethnicity*	<i>N</i> =542	Person with disability	21%
White	43%	Single parent	20%
Hispanic or Latinx/o/a/é	37%	English language learner	13%
Asian or Asian American	15%	Caregiver for adult(s)	12%
Black or African American	10%	U.S. Veteran or active duty	9%
Filipino/a/x	3%	Dependent for transportation	6%
Middle Eastern or North African	2%	Homeless individual	4%
Other	2%	Formerly incarcerated	4%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%	Currently or previously in foster care	2%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2%	None of the above	22%

Note. "Prefer not to answer" responses were excluded. May not total 100 percent due to rounding.

*Multiple options could be selected

This study examined adult learners with varying experiences in the community college system. As shown in Exhibit 2, approximately half of the sample attended a community college and completed their educational goals (54%, completers), while 46% attended but did not complete their educational goals (non-completers). Additional details about the sample can be found in Appendix B: Methodology.

Exhibit 2. Enrollment and Completion of Educational Goals, N=621



For respondents who attended a community college, Exhibit 3 displays the distribution of colleges where they had taken a course. Notably, half of all adult learners enrolled at more than one community college, 26% enrolled in two, and 24% enrolled in three or more. Across the region, the top colleges represented in the sample were Grossmont College (31%), San Diego Mesa College (28%), and San Diego City College (26%).

Exhibit 3. Enrollment by Community Colleges

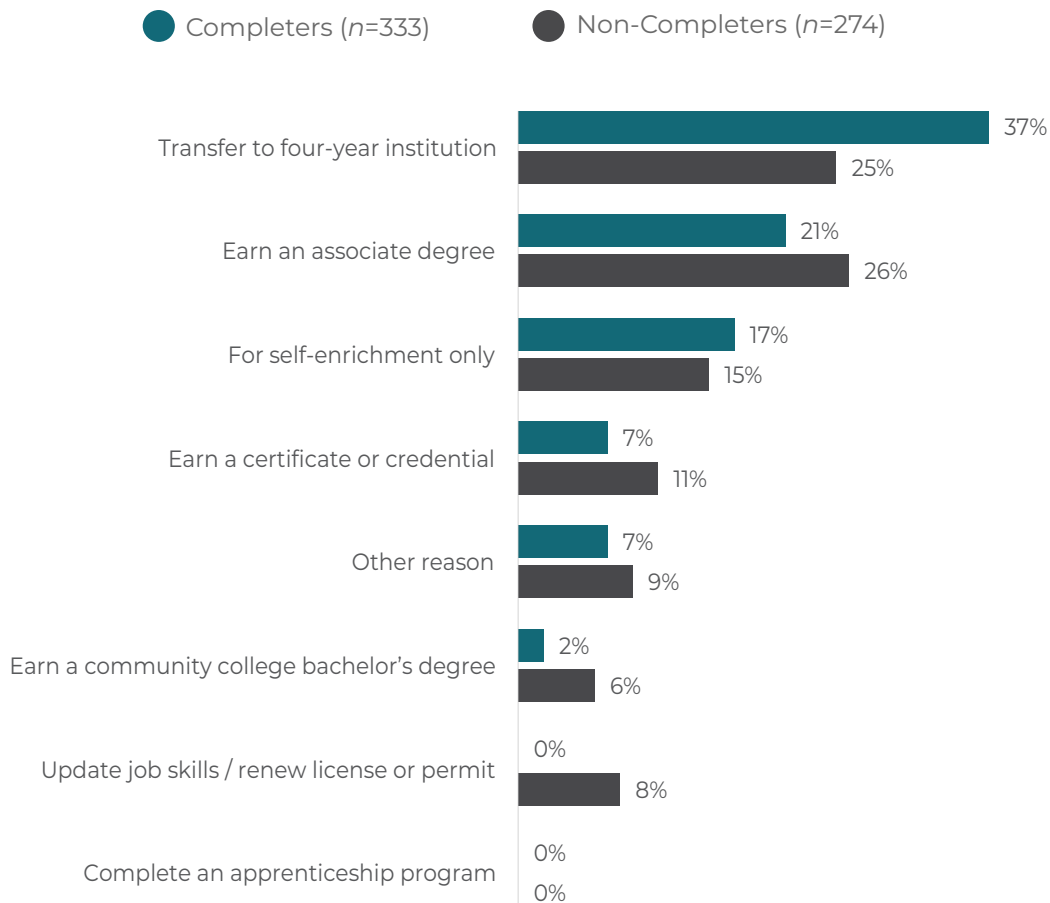
50% of adult learners enrolled in courses at more than one community college

	Total (N=621)	Completers (n=335)	Non-Completers (n=286)
Cuyamaca College	21%	19%	24%
Grossmont College	31%	29%	34%
Imperial Valley College	6%	7%	6%
MiraCosta College	18%	21%	15%
Palomar College	13%	13%	13%
San Diego City College	26%	24%	28%
San Diego College of Continuing Education	6%	6%	6%
San Diego Mesa College	28%	26%	30%
San Diego Miramar College	17%	17%	16%
Southwestern College	25%	24%	26%

Note. Multiple options could be selected.

The survey asked adult learners to identify their primary goal for enrolling in community college. Among completers, the top goals included transferring to a four-year institution (37%), earning an associate degree (21%), and pursuing self-enrichment (17%). Non-completers selected a variety of responses, but approximately one-quarter aimed to earn an associate degree (26%) or to transfer (25%).

Exhibit 4. Primary Goal for Enrolling in Community College



Together, the demographic profile of respondents and their primary reasons for enrolling in the community college system provide important context for understanding the experiences and perspectives of adult learners highlighted in the following sections.

Study Insights

The San Diego & Imperial COE conducted this study to better understand adult learners' personal commitments, experiences within the community college system, and employment outcomes. The following sections present key insights from these findings, summarized below.



Insight #1

Adult learners balance multiple responsibilities—such as working and caregiving—resulting in scheduling conflicts that delay or stop their studies.



Insight #2

Flexible class schedules and accessible course formats are essential for helping adult learners—especially non-completers—persist and complete their educational goals.



Insight #3

Although overall satisfaction is high, completers are more likely than non-completers to view their education as a worthwhile investment and to report positive experiences.



Insight #4

Adult learners who complete their educational goals not only perceive greater career benefits from their education, but also report higher earnings and stronger alignment between their training and employment.

Insight #1

Adult learners balance multiple responsibilities—such as working and caregiving—resulting in scheduling conflicts that delay or stop their studies.

The survey asked respondents to reflect back on the most recent semester they were enrolled in a community college and report the average number of hours spent on various activities. On average, non-completers reported spending slightly more time working and commuting to work and school than completers (Exhibit 5). In terms of providing care for dependents, however, non-completers reported a significantly higher average number of hours than completers. These findings highlight the substantial demands adult learners face outside of the classroom.

Exhibit 5. Average Number of Hours Spent on Activities During a Typical Week

	Completers (n=326)	Non-Completers (n=264)
Working for pay	26 hours	28 hours
Providing care for dependents	20 hours	27 hours*
Preparing for and attending class	16 hours	17 hours
Commuting to work	6 hours	7 hours
Commuting to school	5 hours	6 hours
Participating in college activities	2 hours	2 hours

Note. Sample sizes may vary slightly across items due to missing data.

*Average Hours=Mean; $t(537) = 3.23, p < .05$

"I would like to start going again. I wish there was a way to swing full-time parenting, full-time work, and schooling."

– Single Parent, Non-Completer

"Working at a restaurant significantly impacted my grades negatively."

– BIPOC, Non-Completer

The top reason adult learners stop their studies is due to class schedules conflicting with work or personal commitments

“I appreciated early morning and some evening classes, but [I] think there could’ve been more.”

– Person with Disability, Non-Completer

Of the overall sample, 46% had not yet completed their educational goals. A primary aim of this study was to examine why these students paused or discontinued their studies. The most frequently cited reason was that class schedules conflicted with work or personal commitments (41%), followed by caregiving responsibilities (25%), and time constraints that limited their ability to complete coursework (22%; Exhibit 6). These findings highlight the need for greater flexibility and support systems that accommodate the complex realities of adult learners.

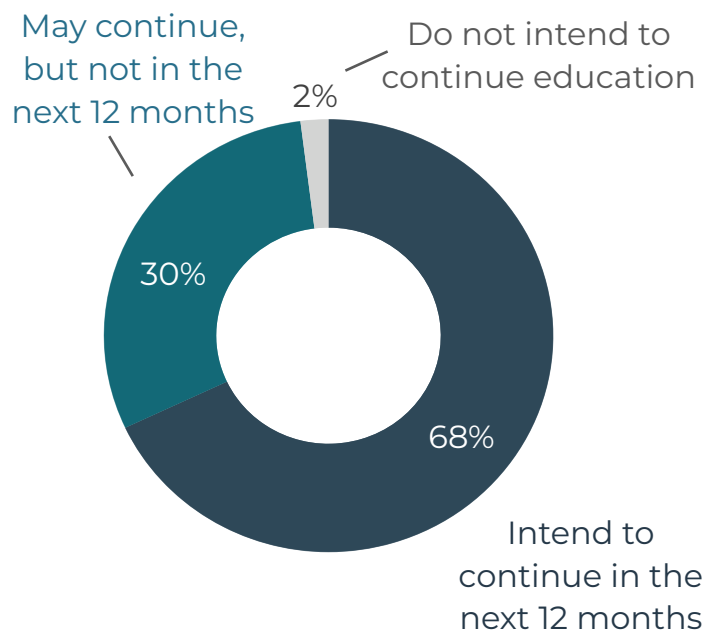
Exhibit 6. Main Reasons Paused or Stopped Community College Studies

	Non-Completers (n=270)
Class schedules conflicted with my work or personal commitments	41%
I had caregiving responsibilities (for children or dependent adults)	25%
I didn't have time for coursework	22%
I could not afford courses and the associated costs (e.g., textbooks)	16%
The courses I needed were not available	16%
I didn't know where to get help	14%
The enrollment process was confusing or difficult	11%
I moved outside the San Diego & Imperial region	9%
I decided to attend a different institution	8%
I did not feel comfortable or welcome on campus	6%
The courses were not relevant or useful to me	5%
Other reason	30%

Note. Multiple options could be selected.

Despite these challenges, adult learners who did not complete their educational goals were overwhelmingly open to continue (98%), and more than half planned to do so in the next 12 months (68%; Exhibit 7). Among those who planned to continue their education—either within the next 12 months or later—98% intended to do so at a community college ($n=245$). This highlights a critical opportunity for community colleges to identify the factors that motivate adult learners' decisions to return. While community colleges may have existing re-engagement strategies, understanding the specific challenges and needs of adult learners can help community colleges refine these approaches to more effectively support their re-enrollment, persistence, and completion.

Exhibit 7. Plan to Continue Education, $n=253$



98% of non-completers who plan to continue their education intend to do so at a community college

"I am enrolling again this fall and will also be taking classes in the spring."

- First-Generation, Non-Completer

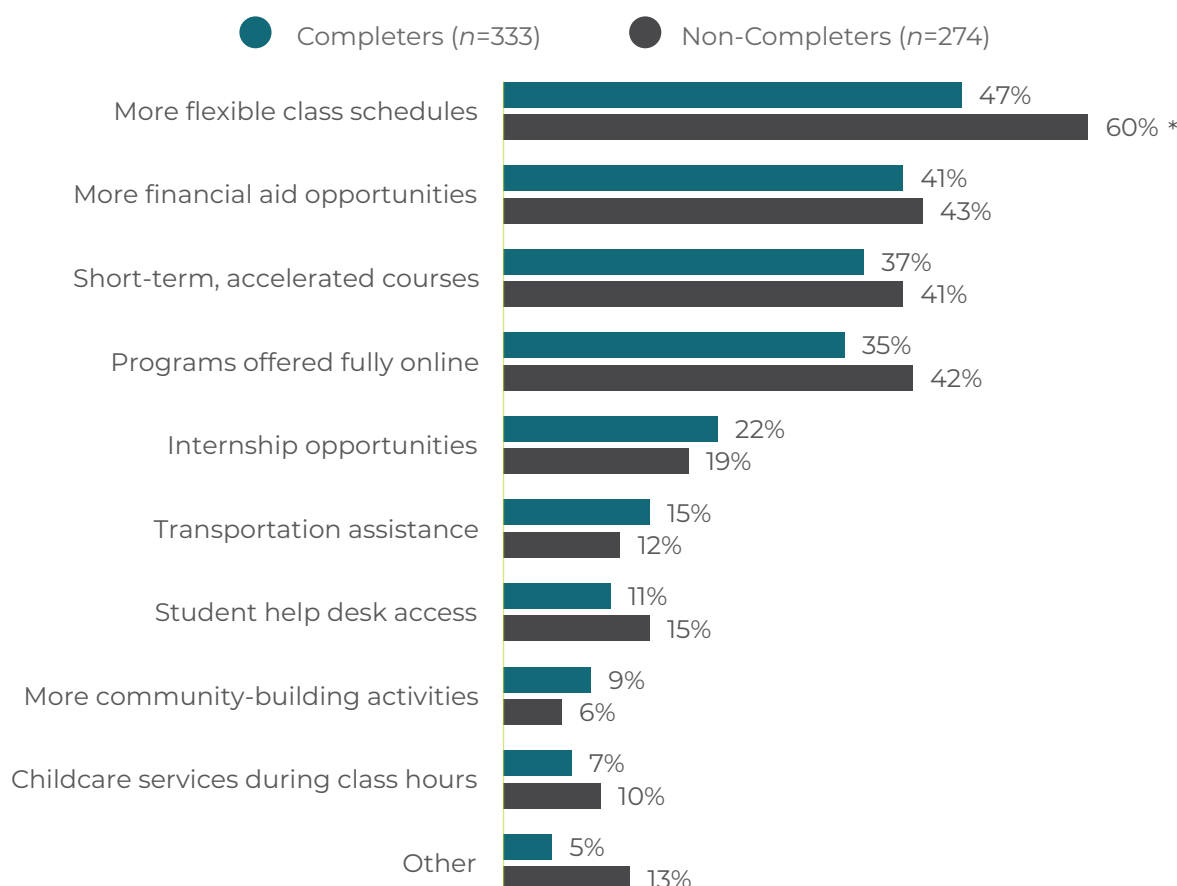
Insight #2

Flexible class schedules and accessible course formats are essential for helping adult learners—especially non-completers—persist and complete their educational goals.

A key objective of this study was to identify the factors and types of support that adult learners find most helpful for completing their educational goals. As shown in Exhibit 8, both completers and non-completers identified “more flexible class schedules” as most helpful; notably, 60% of non-completers selected this option, compared to 47% of completers ($p<.05$). Non-completers also cited more financial aid opportunities (43%), programs offered fully online (42%), and offering short-term or accelerated courses (41%). Overall, these findings highlight that the most valued supports are programmatic—centered on greater flexibility and accessibility in course delivery and scheduling.

Adult learners selected more flexible class schedules as the most helpful for completing their education

Exhibit 8. Percentage that Selected as Most Helpful to Complete Education



Note. Multiple options could be selected. *Significantly higher than comparison group, $p<.05$

What was most helpful...

"[The college] allowed me to complete credits on my own time, even with full-time employment and children in the picture. Thanks to the flexibility of the schedule, availability of classes, and support from staff, I was able to steadily complete my transfer courses..."

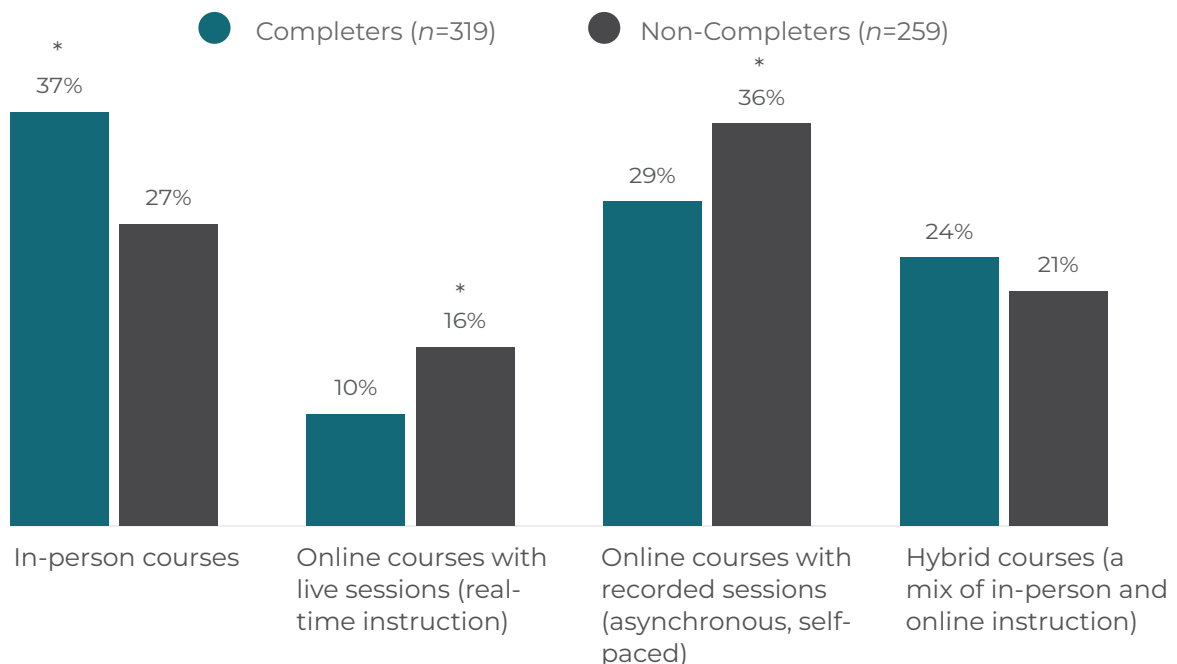
- BIPOC, English-Language Learner

Accommodating a variety of course formats and schedules is essential to improving outcomes for adult learners. When respondents were asked which course format worked best for them, 45% of all adult learners preferred online courses, 33% preferred in-person courses, and 22% preferred hybrid courses (N=578).

67% of all adult learners prefer online or hybrid courses

Exhibit 9 separates preferred course format by completion status, showing that approximately two-thirds of completers preferred online or hybrid course formats, and although roughly one-third preferred in-person courses, more completers preferred this format than non-completers (37% vs. 27%). These results highlight varying preferences among adult learners and illustrate the importance of offering flexible, accessible course formats that meet diverse needs.

Exhibit 9. Preferred Course Format



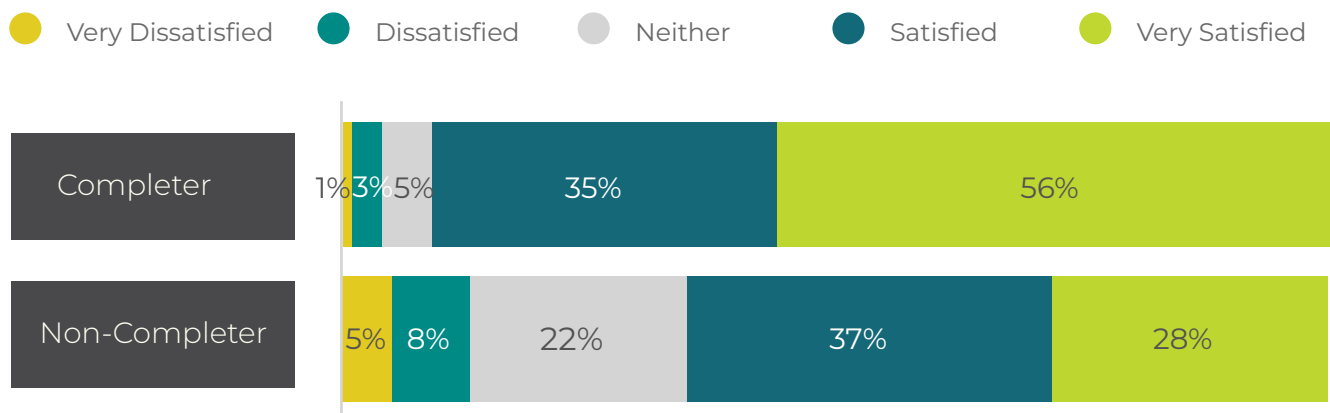
*Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

Insight #3

Although overall satisfaction is high, completers are more likely than non-completers to view their education as a worthwhile investment and to report positive experiences.

The majority of adult learners reported being satisfied with the education and training they received at the community colleges. However, satisfaction varied by completion status; 91% of completers reported being “satisfied” or “very satisfied,” and they were significantly more likely to indicate they were “very satisfied” (56% vs. 28%, $p < .05$), while non-completers more often expressed neutral responses or dissatisfaction than completers. These findings illustrate the connection between completion and satisfaction, suggesting that achieving educational goals may enhance adult learners’ overall perceptions of their community college experience.

Exhibit 10. Satisfaction with Community College Education and Training



91% of adult learners who completed their educational goals were satisfied with their community education and training

“Community college helped me transfer and get my bachelor’s [degree]. Then I went back and studied something completely different, and that is how I have my current career, which I love.”

– BIPOC, Completer

To better understand their experiences, the survey asked adult learners to indicate their level of agreement with statements related to sense of belonging, campus climate, staff support, and access to institutional resources. Across all measures, completers reported significantly more positive experiences with the community colleges than non-completers (Exhibit 11). Most notably, 93% of completers "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that their time at the college was a worthwhile investment, compared to only 69% of non-completers. Similarly, completers were more likely to feel that staff treated them with respect (88% vs. 75%) and (85% vs. 69%). However, when it came to sense of belonging (i.e., feeling connected to other students), only about half of completers (52%) and fewer than two in five non-completers (39%) agreed, indicating that peer connectedness is a challenge for many adult learners, even among those who complete.

93% of completers agreed that community college was a worthwhile investment

● *"Overall, my community college experience was great and worth the investment."*

– *First-Generation, Completer*

Exhibit 11. Experiences While Enrolled at a Community College

	% Strongly Agree/Agree	
	Completers (n=310)	Non-Completers (n=252)
My time at the community colleges was a worthwhile investment	93%*	69%
College staff treated me with respect	88%*	75%
My instructors cared about my success	85%*	67%
The college provided resources and opportunities that were accessible to me	85%*	69%
The college had a welcoming environment	85%*	69%
I felt connected to other students at the college	52%*	39%

Note. Sample sizes may vary slightly across items due to missing data. *Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

Regarding access to resources, 85% of completers and 69% of non-completers agreed that community college resources were accessible (Exhibit 11). Overall, 74% of the sample indicated they had used at least one resource listed in Exhibit 12. The most frequently used supports among adult learners were library access, academic support, and financial assistance. However, only about one in five adult learners reported using career center services, while 26% did not use any services. Additionally, completers were significantly more likely to use academic support than non-completers. These findings point to a critical need for community colleges to strengthen outreach and engagement strategies that encourage adult learners to utilize available support services—key resources that are intended to support persistence and completion.

Exhibit 12. Support Services Used at Community College

	Total (N=553)	Completers (n=304)	Non-Completers (n=249)
Library access	46%	49%	43%
Academic support	36%	43%*	29%
Financial assistance	35%	38%	33%
Career center services	22%	22%	21%
Services for specialized groups	12%	13%	12%
Basic needs assistance	13%	13%	13%
Health services	9%	12%*	5%
Community-building activities	8%	11%*	6%
Counseling services	8%	9%	7%
English language support services	5%	6%	4%
Child development center	3%	4%	2%
None of the above	26%	25%	28%

Note. Multiple options could be selected. *Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

"I hope the schools are doing better at providing resources to students than what I received. I hope it is easier to access since I had a hard time."

- BIPOC, Non-Completer

"I would [have] liked more support from the counselors. There were people who told me they could guide me in getting a job... but there was never any follow-up or effort to support me."

- Non-Completer

Insight #4

Adult learners who complete their educational goals not only perceive greater career benefits from their education, but also report higher earnings and stronger alignment between their training and employment.

To evaluate adult learners' perceptions of how their community college education affected their employment, the survey asked about various employment outcomes. A significantly higher proportion of completers indicated that they received a promotion, a pay/wage increase, and found employment as a result of their community college education compared to non-completers (Exhibit 13). Non-completers, on the other hand, were more likely to select that their education had no impact on their employment compared to completers (58% vs. 37%). These findings suggest that while educational experiences are valuable to all adult learners, completers are more likely to view their community college education as having enhanced their employment opportunities.

Exhibit 13. Perceived Impact of Community College Education on Employment

	Total (N=546)	Completers (n=298)	Non-Completers (n=248)
Upskilled for current employment	27%	35%*	19%
Found full-time employment	14%	19%*	7%
Received a pay/wage increase	9%	11%*	6%
Found part-time employment	7%	9%	6%
Received a promotion	5%	8%*	2%
Other	8%	7%	8%
Started a business	5%	5%	6%
No impact on employment	47%	37%	58%*

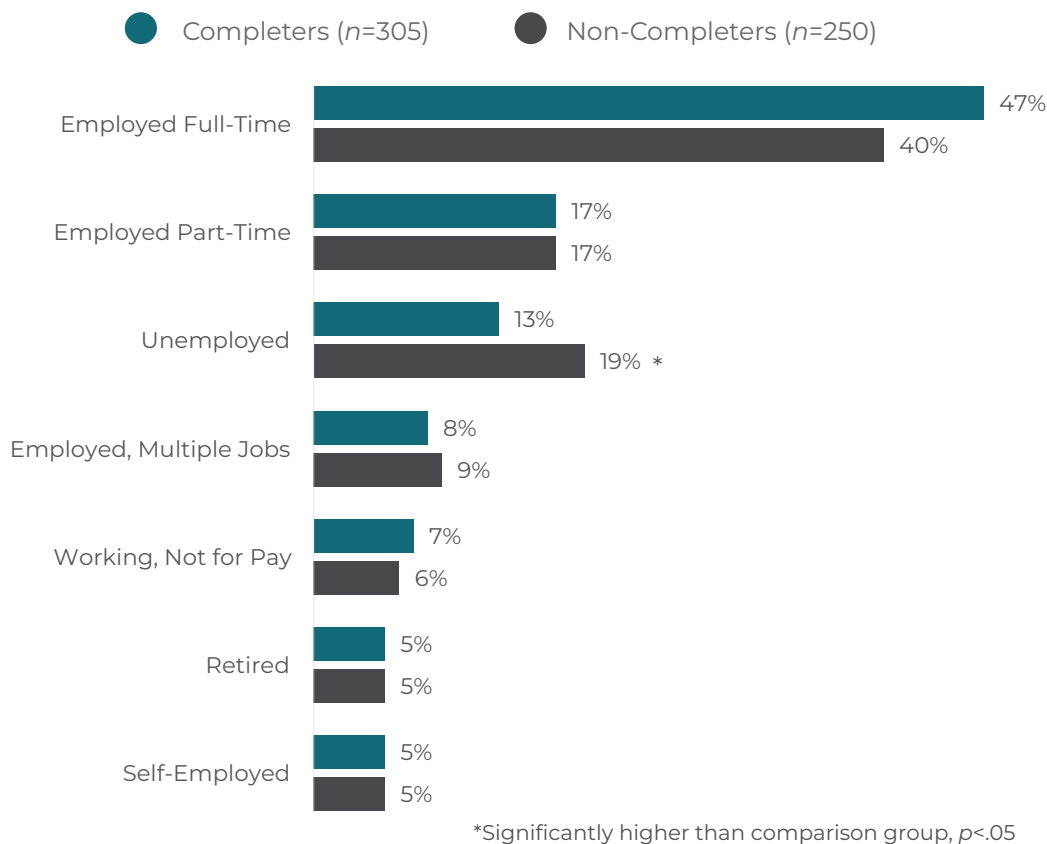
Note. Multiple options could be selected. *Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

"I am extremely grateful for the excellent education I received in the community college system for my pre-requisite courses for the nursing program...They helped me to reach my goal of a fulfilling career as a nurse."

– BIPOC, Completer

Although six in 10 non-completers felt that their education had no impact on employment, when asked about their current employment status, non-completers were significantly more likely to be unemployed (19%) than completers (13%). When focusing on full-time employment, nearly half of completers (47%) were employed compared to 40% of non-completers, while rates of part-time employment were similar between groups (17%).

Exhibit 14. Current Employment by Completion Status



In addition to employment, completing educational goals was associated with whether adult learners worked in a job closely related to their field of study (Exhibit 15). Approximately two-thirds of completers reported that their employment was “very close” or “close,” compared to more than half of non-completers who indicated it was “not close.” These findings suggest that completing educational goals not only increases employment opportunities, but also strengthens the alignment between training and employment.

Exhibit 15. Employed in a Job Closely Related to Field of Study by Completion Status

	Completers (n=298)	Non-Completers (n=246)
Very Close	37%*	21%
Close	29%	25%
Not Close	34%	55%*

*Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

When asked about total gross annual income, more than half of non-completers earned less than \$40,000 per year (55%; Exhibit 16), which is below the living wage for a single adult in San Diego County (\$54,100 annually).⁸ In contrast, 28% of completers reported annual earnings of \$80,000 or more, compared to only 15% of non-completers.

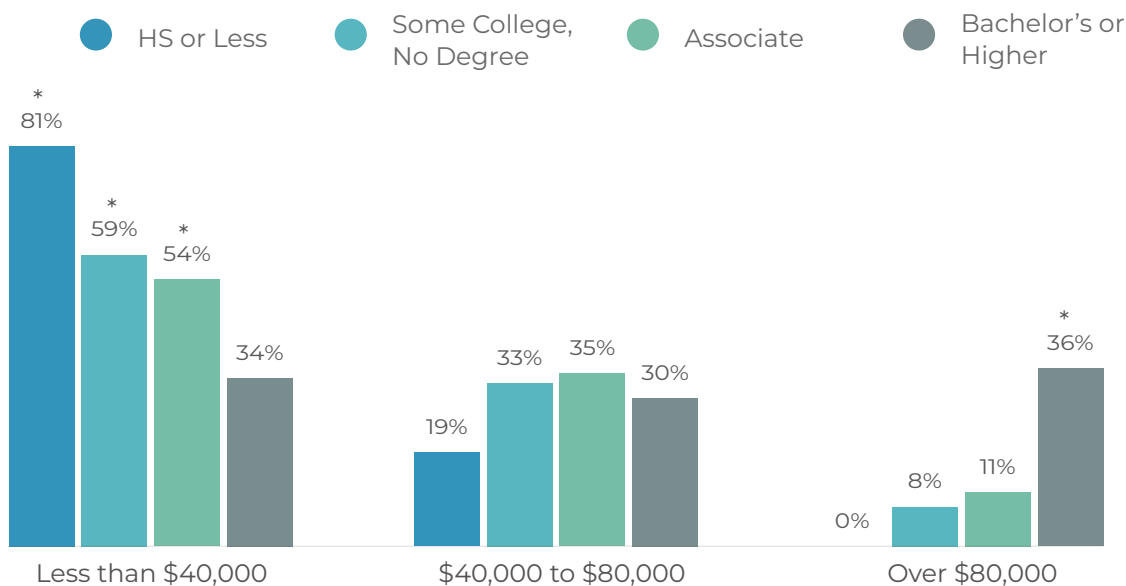
Exhibit 16. Total Annual Gross Income by Completion Status

	Completers (n=259)	Non-Completers (n=218)
Less than \$40,000	41%	55%*
\$40,001 to \$60,000	19%	21%
\$60,001 to \$80,000	13%	10%
Over \$80,000	28%*	15%

*Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

When evaluating the relationship between income and educational attainment, results showed a significant association between income and education.⁹ Those with a bachelor's degree or higher were significantly more likely to report income over \$80,000 (36%), compared to 11% or less among groups with lower educational attainment (Exhibit 17). These findings highlight the substantial economic advantage associated with higher levels of educational attainment, which is critical for achieving economic stability.

Exhibit 17. Annual Gross Income by Education Level, (N=477)



*Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

⁸ Center for Women's Welfare, University of Washington. (2023). The self-sufficiency standard for California, 2023. selfsufficiencystandard.org/California.

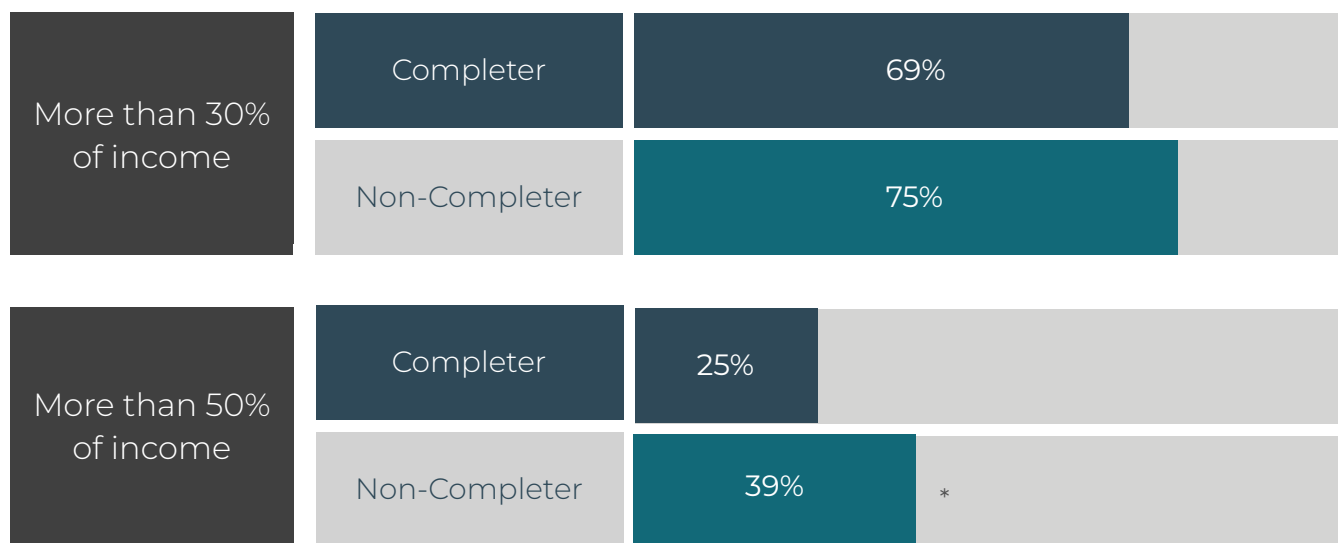
⁹ $\chi^2(6, N=473) = 67.60, p < .05$.

72% of adult learners spend more than 30% of their income on housing

32% of adult learners spend more than 50% of their income on housing

Given the growing number of households burdened by housing costs in San Diego County in recent years, this study also examined the percentage of income adult learners spent on housing during their most recent semester while attending community college. Across the sample, 72% spent more than 30% of their income on housing costs (e.g., cost burdened households), and 32% spent more than 50% of their income on housing (e.g., severely cost burdened households).¹⁰ When examined by completion status, not only do non-completers report lower wages (Exhibit 16), but they also report greater financial strain related to housing costs (Exhibit 18). Non-completers were significantly more likely than completers to spend more than 50% of their income on housing (39% vs. 25%; $p < .05$). Together, these results highlight the significant financial challenges that housing costs pose for adult learners, and the potential impact of these burdens on their ability to complete their education.

Exhibit 18. Percentage of Income Spent on Housing by Completion Status



*Significantly higher than comparison group, $p < .05$

¹⁰ Cost burdened households spend 30% or more of their income towards housing costs, while severely burdened households spend more than 50%. "Affordable Housing Needs Report: San Diego County 2023," California Housing Partnership, 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, https://chpc.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/San-Diego-County_Housing-Report_2023.pdf.

Recommendations

This section summarizes recommendations and reflections for the San Diego & Imperial Community Colleges based on the insights of this study:

Recommendation #1

Prioritize flexible scheduling and class formats that expand access, persistence, and completion for adult learners balancing multiple responsibilities.

Recommendation #2

Develop targeted re-engagement and re-enrollment strategies that ease the burden on adult learners returning to college.

Recommendation #3

Provide adult learners with high-touch guidance that helps them navigate college systems and connect them with student support services.

Recommendation #4

Strengthen pathways to high-demand, high-wage careers by expanding access to career services that promote employment readiness and advancement.

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments for Adult Learners

In *Vision 2030*, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office calls on colleges to design instruction that supports success for all students, including adult learners.¹

One effective approach is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)—a flexible, student-centered framework that helps educators create accessible and engaging learning experiences.² UDL encourages faculty to offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression so that every learner has equitable opportunities to succeed.

For more information, the Chancellor's Office hosted a webinar that explains the principles of UDL, demonstrating how this approach can help build inclusive, equitable, and student-centered environments that support the success of adult learners.³

¹ "Vision 2030 - The July 2025 Edition," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, July 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/vision2030/vision-2030-report.pdf

² "Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education: Implementation Blueprint," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, August 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/ca-direct-assessment-cbe-blueprint-a11y.pdf

³ "System Webinar: Universal Design for Learning," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, December 2024, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.zoom.us/rec/play/zeIXOh0pjhltoSSz1eq4_9zQGYZmn9Jo49-3hKxUrkDd9Xv1KWWLMJ2bal7fdz7Fbk5USpeOxGeFF2C8.aEitkB4W0L2FtkNT

Recommendation #1

Prioritize flexible scheduling and class formats that expand access, persistence, and completion for adult learners balancing multiple responsibilities.

A central finding of this study was that adult learners cited flexible class scheduling as the most critical factor supporting their ability to persist and complete their educational goals. Likewise, non-completers most commonly cited conflicting class schedules with work and personal commitments as the primary reason for pausing their studies.

These findings align with prior research—including the *Black Student Equity: Overcoming Barriers and Providing Support* report published by the San Diego & Imperial COE—which underscored the importance of flexible scheduling and intentional program design.¹¹ The report emphasized the value of conducting program reviews to examine student demographics and identifying inequities or access gaps—an approach that could also be applied to understand adult learners. To address scheduling barriers, the report recommended that community colleges:

Review local Career Education pathways and strategic enrollment plans to ensure alignment and flexibility for full-time, part-time, day, night, and online students. This includes mapping programs by discipline and career outcomes to identify and remove scheduling barriers.

Assess local scheduling practices to identify gaps in course offerings and the underlying causes (e.g., faculty availability, low enrollment, or professional development needs) and develop targeted solutions.

Expanding online education is a key statewide strategy for increasing access and flexibility for all students, including adult learners. *The Vision 2030 Online Teaching and Learning Work Plan* from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office aligns systemwide priorities by 1) expanding the



“Actually give me hope of doing something to help working adults be able to continue their education without having to either sacrifice their finances or sanity. Because I am at this point just depressed and feel like I won’t even be able to get my degree... I feel that I’m just being ignored when I ask for more options for [students] who work full-time to have evening or online classes...”

– First-Generation, Caregiver

¹¹ “Black Student Equity: Overcoming Barriers and Providing Support,” San Diego & Imperial COE, May 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, coecc.net/san-diego-imperial/2023/05/black-student-equity.

inventory of online offerings available to students and 2) strengthening professional development opportunities for educators focused on effective online instruction.¹² As shown in this study, flexible course formats are critical for adult learners who often balance multiple responsibilities, and 67% of all adult learners prefer online or hybrid course formats (Exhibit 9).

The California Community Colleges' Online Education Initiative (OEI) and California Virtual Campus (CVC) support these goals. The CVC enables students enrolled at one California Community College to cross-enroll in online courses offered by other colleges without having to submit additional applications.¹³ As of 2024–25, more than 109 community colleges participated, with projected enrollments nearing 50,000 students.

While expanding online options is critical for improving access, instructional quality remains equally important. One study found that an instructor's social presence positively impacted student engagement and attrition.¹⁴ In this study, one student highlighted the importance of instructor engagement:

“The person providing the online course was not very good at presenting. All they did was talk about the material. I got sick of just listening, where I could have just read the material in my own time.” – BIPOC, First Generation

To engage adult learners, online courses must be well-designed, interactive, and foster meaningful participation among students. As shown in Exhibit 11, peer connectedness among adult learners received the lowest levels of agreement from both completers and non-completers, suggesting a need for stronger community-building at the colleges. Research consistently shows that a sense of belonging and engagement are vital to academic motivation and persistence,¹⁵ illustrating that effective instruction—not just course availability—is important for adult learners' success.

Recognizing that instructional quality is key to meaningful online learning, community colleges can leverage statewide initiatives such as CVC@ONE (Online Network of Educators), which provides faculty and staff with professional development through courses, workshops, and webinars aligned with *Vision 2030*.^{16,17} At the regional level, investing in instructional-design support, faculty collaboration, and shared professional learning communities could also encourage high-quality, engaging online instruction.

12 “Vision 2030 Online Teaching and Learning Work Plan,” California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, November 2024, accessed October 1, 2025, [go.boarddocs.com/ca/ccchan/Board.nsf/files/DB2QVQ6B26E0/\\$file/attachment-vision-2030-online-teaching-and-learning-work-plan-final-v2-all.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/ccchan/Board.nsf/files/DB2QVQ6B26E0/$file/attachment-vision-2030-online-teaching-and-learning-work-plan-final-v2-all.pdf).

13 “California Virtual Campus,” California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, accessed October 1, 2025, cvc.edu.

14 Shehzad, N., & Charles, T. (2023). Exploring the Impact of instructor social presence on student engagement in online higher education. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 15(4), ep484. doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/13823.

15 “Vision 2030 - The July 2025 Edition,” California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, July 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.edu/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/vision2030/vision-2030-report.pdf.

16 “California Virtual Campus' Online Network of Educators (CVC@ONE),” California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, accessed October 1, 2025, onlinenetworkofeducators.org.

17 “Vision 2030 - The July 2025 Edition,” California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, July 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, cocco.edu/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/vision2030/vision-2030-report.pdf.

Community Colleges are Reimagining Ways to Serve Adult Learners

Direct assessment competency-based education (CBE) is a learning model that allows students to progress at their own pace by demonstrating mastery of specific skills and knowledge. This approach is especially beneficial for students who work full-time or have significant life obligations that make it challenging to attend regularly scheduled classes.¹⁸

Southwestern College is one of eight pilot colleges in California developing the state's first CBE associate degree programs. CBE Accelerate programs allow students to apply skills gained through work or prior experience to move through coursework at their own pace—slowing down when they need more help, and advancing once they demonstrate mastery.

The *Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education Blueprint* provides colleges with detailed guidance, best practices, planning considerations, and meaningful reflections on the effective implementation of CBE programs across the state.¹⁹

Reflection Questions

- ▶ How can the colleges design more flexible instructional formats (e.g., hybrid, evening, weekend, rolling enrollment) that meet adult learner needs while maintaining academic integrity and faculty support?
- ▶ How well do current course schedules and delivery modes align with adults' learner availability? Are there required courses where limited online or evening offerings create barriers to completion? Are colleges continuously reviewing when these courses are offered?
- ▶ How can colleges collaborate with employers to design course schedules and delivery modes that align with workforce demands and adult learners' availability?
- ▶ How might colleges collaborate regionally and increase access to needed courses? Are there opportunities to create cross-campus programs or awards?
- ▶ What institutional resources and capacities (e.g., staffing, curriculum design, technology, student support, funding) are needed to develop and sustain strategies that support learners, such as CBE or Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), which allows students to earn college credit for knowledge and skills gained outside of the classroom?

¹⁸ "Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, accessed October 1, 2025, [cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Educational-Services-and-Support/da-cbe](https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Educational-Services-and-Support/da-cbe).

¹⁹ "Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education: Implementation Blueprint," California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, August 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, [cccco.edu/-/media/CCCO-Website/docs/report/ca-direct-assessment-cbe-blueprint-a1ly.pdf](https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCO-Website/docs/report/ca-direct-assessment-cbe-blueprint-a1ly.pdf).

Recommendation #2

Develop targeted re-engagement strategies and re-enrollment processes that ease the burden on adult learners returning to college.

Re-engaging students that have left the community college system, often due to competing work and personal demands, remains a critical challenge for institutions.²⁰ Encouragingly, the majority of adult learners in this study indicated they plan to continue their community college education, and nearly 70% of non-completers plan to do so in the next 12 months (Exhibit 7). This presents a timely opportunity for community colleges to re-evaluate their re-engagement strategies, focusing on challenges that caused adult learners to pause their studies in the first place. The findings from this study provide a foundation for colleges to better understand adult learners' needs and the barriers to re-enrollment and completion. Colleges are encouraged to use this information to inform outreach strategies and, where additional context is needed, to engage directly with students to gather qualitative insights that strengthen re-engagement efforts.

Reconnecting Adult Learners: Lessons from CA Reconnect

California Reconnect (CA Reconnect) is an initiative that relies on a student-centered approach to re-engage learners who have some college, but have not yet earned a credential. In the first two years, 13 institutions participated in this effort, including City College, Mesa College, and Miramar College in the San Diego Community College District.²¹ An evaluation included the following strategies and findings:²²

Personalized Outreach. This initiative focused on strategies that leverage targeted outreach and personalized one-on-one coaching (e.g., facilitating hand-offs to campus staff members, navigating available resources and deadlines). The evaluation found that using more personalized, targeted strategies led to a re-enrollment rate that was six times higher than the national average.

Mixed Communication Formats. The evaluation found that higher outbound communication, and a variety of methods, was linked to greater responsiveness.

Timely Outreach. Re-enrollment is more common among adult learners who have stepped out for a shorter period, suggesting that the longer a student remains disengaged from the community college system, the less likely they are to return.

20 "Can I Make This Work with My Life?" Exploring the College (Re)Enrollment Decisions of Adult Learners of Color," American Institutes for Research, September 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, air.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Adult-Learners-of-Color-Narrative-Final-Report-October-2023.pdf.

21 "California ReConnect," InsideTrack, accessed October 1, 2025, info.insidetrack.org/california-reconnect.

22 Marbella Uriostegui, Leanne Davis, Pablo López Trujillo, and Manuel Vazquez, "California Reconnect Initiative: Year One Evaluation," Education Northwest, March 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, cdn.prod.website-files.com/649b43e91986800721de4a15/686ffc54e30d622143186421_CA_Reconnect_Evaluation_Report_Year_1_508c.pdf.

Although reaching students and addressing their concerns is key, informational barriers and confusing re-enrollment processes must be addressed. Students face complex administrative procedures, limited access to records, or unclear program requirements that can hinder them from returning.²³ A recent report by the American Institutes for Research found that adult learners often struggled with onboarding and navigating institutional requirements.²⁴ Consistent with the findings of this study, the *Comprehensive Regional Needs Assessment (CRNA)* reinforces the need for the community college system to strengthen support for students through these initial phases.²⁵ The CRNA recommends in-depth training for counselors and case managers at community-based organizations (CBOs) to help increase awareness of available resources and eligibility requirements. Overall, community colleges should examine their processes to ensure that existing barriers for adult learners are not administrative.

“I really had a hard time getting registered and then enrolled in my classes. It would be nice to have something geared more to older adults.”

- Caregiver, Non-Completer

“Please be more helpful with registration. Stop just saying go online.”

- Parent, Non-Completer

Reflection Questions

- ▶ What strategies are currently in place to re-engage students who have stopped out, and how is the college assessing the effectiveness of these outreach and communication efforts?
- ▶ Given that re-enrollment is more likely within a year of leaving, how can the college implement early interventions to reduce the time between pausing and returning?
- ▶ What institutional policies or procedures—such as transcript requests, reapplication processes, or unclear program requirements—might unintentionally create barriers to re-enrollment, and how can these be streamlined?
- ▶ How can colleges strengthen guidance and communication during the re-enrollment process so that students know where and how to access help at every stage of the process?
- ▶ How might the college collaborate with community-based organizations or workforce partners to reach potential returners, share information about re-enrollment, or assist with navigation and support services?

23 “Can I Make This Work with My Life?” Exploring the College (Re)Enrollment Decisions of Adult Learners of Color,” American Institutes for Research, September 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, air.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Adult-Learners-of-Color-Narrative-Final-Report-October-2023.pdf.

24 Ibid.

25 “Perkins V Comprehensive Regional Needs Assessment,” San Diego & Imperial COE, November 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, coeccc.net/san-diego-imperial/2023/11/perkins-v-comprehensive-regional-needs-assessment-2.

Recommendation #3

Provide adult learners with high-touch guidance that helps them navigate the community college system, and prioritize connecting them to student support services.

Support services remain a critical component of adult learners' success. In this study, 74% of respondents indicated they had used at least one student support resource, though fewer than half reported using each individual service (Exhibit 12). The most frequently used services among adult learners were library access, academic support, and financial assistance. Exhibit 23 in the Appendix also shows that the support most needed outside of business hours is library access.

This study also found a significant association between use of support services and agreement with the statement, "The college provided resources and opportunities that were accessible to me."²⁶ Findings from the *Student Support Services Experiences Study* by the San Diego & Imperial COE also reinforce this point—students who used any type of support service were significantly more likely to report that their education and training were a worthwhile investment, compared to those who did not.²⁷

A primary reason adult learners enrolled in community college was to transfer to a bachelor's degree granting institution (Exhibit 4). Academic support services play a vital role in helping adult learners navigate transfer pathways, and engagement with these services appear particularly influential for completion. Non-completers were significantly less likely to use these services than completers, and logistic regression analysis revealed that students who used academic support services were nearly twice as likely to complete their educational goals compared to those who did not (OR=1.96, p=.03). These findings highlight the need for proactive engagement strategies that connect adult learners with academic resources early and often throughout their educational journey. Colleges should explore barriers to accessing these services—such as limited hours or in-person requirements that conflict with work schedules—to ensure they are meeting adult learners where they are. These findings also illustrate the importance of intersegmental partnerships that streamline the complex transition from community colleges to four-year institutions and the need to make these pathways more transparent.

"They need to do better training their school counselors because there [have] been too many incidents where students couldn't apply for universities because they keep giving the wrong classes they needed to take." – BIPOC, First Generation

26 $\chi^2 (2, N=550)=9.32, p<.05$

27 "Student Support Services Experiences Study," San Diego & Imperial COE, May 2024, accessed October 1, 2025, coeccc.net/san-diego-imperial/2024/05/student-support-services-experiences-study.

Research from the *Public Policy Institution of California* supports these findings and offers strategies to strengthen transfer outcomes, particularly among underrepresented students. PPIC recommends that community colleges:²⁸

- **Prioritize student-centered supports and wraparound services** to reduce barriers to completing transfer prerequisites. This includes actively supporting students who have met or nearly met eligibility requirements for transfer, and strengthening wraparound supports (e.g. counseling, mentoring, peer navigators) for them.
- **Strengthen alignment and intersegmental collaborations** to build clearer transfer pathways. Misalignment between community college courses and four-year requirements often force students to repeat coursework or lose credit. The report urges colleges to work closely with universities to streamline articulation and remove these barriers.
- **Expand and strengthen dual enrollment**, as students who have earned credits (e.g., transfer-level course completion, dual enrollment while in high school) are more likely to transfer.

Community Colleges Are Driving Institutional Changes to Support Adult Learners



The *Institutional Change for Adult Learner Success (2025)* report by the American Institutes for Research features case studies of how community college institutions are driving positive outcomes for adult learners by embedding student supports within broader institutional change efforts.²⁹ Successful colleges redesigned their approaches to offer personalized, high-touch support, such as success coaches, navigators, and centralized offices that simplify access to resources. Numerous colleges also invest in faculty and staff development to strengthen data literacy, cultural competence, and understanding adult learners' needs. This data-informed culture encourages colleges to track key metrics, like engagement, that helps refine supports over time. The report emphasizes that adult learner success requires institution-wide collaboration and a welcoming environment where adult learners feel supported and connected to the resources that help them persist and complete their goals.

28 Marisol Cuellar Mejia, Hans Johnson, Cesar Alesi Perez, and Jacob Jackson, "Strengthening California's Transfer Pathway," Public Policy Institute of California, August 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, [ppic.org/?show-pdf=true&docraptor=true&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ppic.org%2Fpublication%2Fstrengthening-californias-transfer-pathway%2F](https://www.pplic.org/publication/strengthening-californias-transfer-pathway)

29 "Institutional Change for Adult Learner Success," American Institutes for Research, June 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, air.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/AIR-Adult-Learner-Institutional-Change-Report-June-2025.pdf

Although enrollment is the first step, continued support is essential. Strategic enrollment management, or SEM, is an approach used to examine and support a student's entire academic experience, from the first point of contact to completion. *Advancing Adult Learner Success Through Strategic Enrollment Management* by California Competes highlights how 10 community colleges implemented adult learner-focused SEM strategies to sustain persistence. These efforts included a case management approach by flagging students without education plans and proactively outreaching to students who stopped out.³⁰ The report also identifies systemic and implementation barriers that can inform future improvement efforts.

Regionally, MiraCosta College and San Diego Miramar College participated in this initiative. Their experiences demonstrate the value of building a collaborative ecosystem in which colleges share resources, data, and effective practices to strengthen adult learner persistence and completion.

Collectively, these findings emphasize the importance of accessible, proactive, and responsive student support systems. Colleges should continue investing in collecting, sharing, and disaggregating data about adult learners to better evaluate the effectiveness of their support services.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ How effectively does the college integrate adult learner supports into broader strategic initiatives, and are there any services specifically tailored to adult learners?
- ▶ What opportunities exist to create or expand “high-touch” support models—such as success coaches or centralized resource hubs—to better serve adult learners?
- ▶ In what ways is the college building faculty and staff capacity around data literacy, cultural competence, and adult learning principles? What metrics are used to identify gaps in support or in outcomes for adult learners?
- ▶ How is the college approaching the design and continuous improvement of programs and services from the adult learner's perspective? How might it co-design these efforts with adult learners and community-based organizations to ensure supports are seamless, inclusive, and responsive to their needs?

● *“Every time I went to see a counselor for help to complete my goal, it was always a different counselor and they always changed my requirements. In the end, I didn't know what I truly needed.”*

– Woman, Non-Completer

30 Marisol Cuellar Mejia, Hans Johnson, Cesar Alesi Perez, and Jacob Jackson, “Strengthening California's Transfer Pathway,” Public Policy Institute of California, August 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, [ppic.org/?show-pdf=true&docraptor=true&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ppic.org%2Fpublication%2Fstrengthening-californias-transfer-pathway%2F](https://www.ppic.org/publication/strengthening-californias-transfer-pathway/).

Recommendation #4

Strengthen pathways to high-demand, high-wage careers by expanding access to career services that promote employment readiness and advancement.

This study found that completing educational goals is strongly associated with more favorable employment outcomes—completers tended to earn higher wages, perceive greater value in their education, and were less likely to be unemployed than those who did not complete their educational goals. This reinforces the critical role of degree attainment and completion in improving economic mobility and career stability for adult learners.

A key objective of *Vision 2030* is to ensure that all students, including adult learners, are guided into high-wage, high-demand career opportunities. To advance this goal, colleges should regularly assess whether programs that train for these types of careers have adult learners in mind. For instance, is there flexibility in scheduling and a variety of course formats offered for priority programs? Are adult learners primarily concentrated in a limited number of programs that accommodate their schedules, potentially excluding them from programs that could lead to high-wage, high-demand careers? As a starting point, community colleges can reference the San Diego & Imperial COE reports, *Priority Jobs and Programs: Addressing Equity Gaps for a Diverse Workforce*, which identified 50 priority occupations and 72 corresponding programs in San Diego County, and 52 priority occupations and 59 programs in Imperial County.^{31,32} These findings can help colleges identify which programs offer the greatest potential for upward mobility and determine where greater flexibility in course scheduling and delivery may be needed to better serve adult learners.

Career services also play an essential role in connecting education to employment. These services help students with setting career goals, identifying employment opportunities, and preparing for the job market. The *Student Support Services Experiences Study* by the San Diego & Imperial COE found that students who utilized career services were more likely to get a job related to their field of study, and to report that their college helped them reach their employment goals.³³ The study also emphasized the need to strengthen these services for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students to ensure equitable access to career advancement opportunities.

Although the current study did not find significant differences in use of career services between completers and non-completers (Exhibit 12), it revealed that overall participation in career services among adult learners remains low, and roughly 80% of respondents in the sample did not use these services. This underscores the need for colleges to promote

31 “Priority Jobs and Programs: Addressing Equity Gaps for a Diverse Workforce (San Diego County),” San Diego & Imperial COE, January 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, coecc.net/san-diego-imperial/2024/12/priority-jobs-and-programs-addressing-equity-gaps-for-a-diverse-workforce.

32 “Priority Jobs and Programs: Addressing Equity Gaps for a Diverse Workforce (Imperial County),” San Diego & Imperial COE, January 2025, accessed October 1, 2025, coecc.net/san-diego-imperial/2025/03/priority-jobs-and-programs-addressing-equity-gaps-for-a-diverse-workforce-imperial-county.

33 “Student Support Services Experiences Study,” San Diego & Imperial COE, May 2024, accessed October 1, 2025, coecc.net/san-diego-imperial/2024/05/student-support-services-experiences-study.

and expand access to career services, particularly for students balancing work, family, and other responsibilities. Rather than viewing these students as unengaged, colleges can adopt flexible and creative approaches to career readiness. Examples include offering virtual career advising, extending service hours, or embedding career exploration within courses.

As with other recommendations, the San Diego & Imperial COE encourages the community colleges to share effective approaches, collaborate regionally, and track key metrics that illuminate successful strategies for connecting adult learners to career pathways that promote long-term economic mobility.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ How does the college ensure that programs leading to high-wage, high-demand careers are accessible to adult learners? Are adult learners equitably represented across priority programs, or are they concentrated in only a few fields that accommodate their schedules?
- ▶ What creative strategies can community colleges adopt to increase adult learners' engagement with career services, particularly for those balancing work, family, and other responsibilities?
- ▶ At what key points in the student journey does the college intentionally check in with adult learners to provide career guidance and planning support? How might these touchpoints be expanded or better coordinated?



"[It was helpful that the college's] career services had unconventional hours for even part-time workers."

- Person with disability, Completer

Conclusion

The San Diego & Imperial COE conducted this study to understand adult learners' experiences with the community college system, including their primary goals for enrolling, barriers to persistence, use of support services, and employment outcomes. The findings provide a regional perspective that highlight opportunities to strengthen strategies, policies, and practices that effectively serve adult learners across the region.

Future research should continue to expand upon these findings through qualitative feedback, exploring more in-depth the types of supports that might have helped non-completers persist, the motivations or challenges that influence their decision to return, or what helped completers achieve their educational goals, for example. As colleges move forward, they are encouraged to conduct their own research and dialogue with students to expand upon these insights.

With state-level support through new funding streams, professional development opportunities, and regional collaboration, colleges can use the reflection questions, reports, and resources referenced in this study as a guide to encourage meaningful reflection and data-informed planning to advance the success of adult learners.

Appendix A: Data Tables

Exhibit 19. Enrollment of Adult Learners by Community College³⁴

College	Total Enrollment, 2023-24	% Adult Learners (Ages 25+)
Cuyamaca	11,599	44%
Grossmont	17,473	37%
Imperial Valley	11,052	38%
MiraCosta	20,182	48%
Palomar	26,451	41%
San Diego City	19,421	45%
San Diego Miramar	20,900	47%
San Diego College of Continuing Education	24,419	88%
San Diego Mesa	27,619	38%
Southwestern	26,842	44%

³⁴ "General Admit Students Disaggregated by Age: All Programs," DataVista, Program Years 2023-24, accessed October 1, 2025, datavista.cccco.edu/data_views/metric_themes_nsa.

Exhibit 20. Demographics by Completion Status

	Completers	Non-Completers
Gender	<i>n</i> =288	<i>n</i> =243
Woman	72%	76%
Man	25%	22%
Non-Binary / Self-Describe	3%	1%
Age	<i>n</i> =286	<i>n</i> =240
25 - 34	40%	41%
35 - 44	26%	25%
45 - 54	17%	17%
55 - 64	13%	13%
65 and above	4%	4%
Race/Ethnicity*	<i>n</i> =278	<i>n</i> =238
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	3%
Asian or Asian American	17%	14%
Black or African American	6%	14%
Hispanic or Latinx/o/a/é	36%	39%
Filipino/a/x	4%	3%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	3%	1%
Middle Eastern or North African	3%	2%
White	46%	41%
Other	3%	2%

Note. "Prefer not to answer" responses were excluded. Multiple options could be selected.

*May not total 100 percent due to rounding

Exhibit 21. Special Population by Completion Status

	Completers (n=281)	Non-Completers (n=237)
First-generation college student (e.g., parents did not graduate from college)	40%	42%
Parent to child(ren) under 18 years old	25%	36%
Single parent	16%	16%
Low-income resident (e.g., receiving TANF/SSI/General Assistance)	16%	21%
Person with physical or mental disability	15%	19%
English language learner	9%	10%
Caregiver for adult(s) 18 years old or older	8%	10%
U.S. Veteran or active duty	7%	7%
Dependent on third-party transportation or public transportation	4%	7%
Homeless individual	2%	4%
Formerly incarcerated, on probation/parole, or impacted by the justice system	2%	3%
Refugee or asylee	1%	0%
Currently or previously in the foster care system	0%	3%*
None of the above	25%	19%

Note. "Prefer not to answer" responses were excluded. Multiple options could be selected.

Exhibit 22. Highest Education Level Completed by Completion Status

	Completers (n=292)	Non-Completers (n=245)
Some high school, did not graduate	1%	2%
High school graduate (diploma, GED, or equivalent)	2%	10%*
Some college credit, no degree	4%	49%*
Associate degree (AA, AS)	28%*	7%
Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)	42%*	18%
Graduate degree (Master's, Ph.D.)	23%*	12%

Note. "Prefer not to answer" responses were excluded.

Exhibit 23. Likelihood of Using Student Services Outside of Business Hours

	% Very Likely / Likely	
	Completers (n=304)	Non-Completers (n=249)
Library access	71%	69%
Academic support	68%	67%
Financial aid services	65%	67%
Admission & records	63%	68%
Career center services	62%	62%
Health services	52%	49%
Community-building activities	43%	39%
Services specialized for certain groups	31%	32%

Note. Multiple options could be selected.

Exhibit 24. Reasons for Prospective Students Not Attending / Enrolling

	Prospective Students (n=26)
I didn't know where to get help to navigate the system	35%
The enrollment process was confusing or difficult	31%
Class schedules conflicted with my work or personal commitments	27%
Other, please specify	23%
I had caregiving responsibilities (for children or dependent adults)	15%
I didn't have time for coursework	12%
I could not afford courses and/or the associated costs (such as living expenses, transportation, or textbooks)	8%
The courses I needed were not available	8%
I did not feel comfortable and/or welcome on campus	4%
The courses were not relevant or useful to me	4%

Note. Multiple options could be selected.

Exhibit 25. Supports Needed by Prospective Students

	Prospective Students (n=26)
Make it easier to talk to someone about my questions or concerns	58%
Offer more flexible class schedules (evenings, weekends, online)	46%
Simplify the enrollment process	38%
Reach out personally to offer support or guidance	38%
Make required classes more available (not limited to specific semesters)	35%
Make financial aid options easier to understand	27%
Help me explore career options and their related academic pathways	27%
Other, please specify	15%
Provide childcare so I can attend classes	12%

Note. Multiple options could be selected.

Exhibit 26. Top Supports Prospective Students Would Use

	Prospective Students (<i>n</i> =26)
Library access (book rental, computer lab, study space)	46%
Career center services (career planning, career counseling, internships, job search help)	38%
Financial assistance (scholarships)	38%
Academic support (academic advising, tutoring, transfer support)	35%
Basic needs assistance (e.g., diapers, food, transportation, housing)	23%

Note. Multiple options could be selected.

Appendix B: Methodology

Research Design

The San Diego & Imperial Center of Excellence (COE) modeled this study after the Black Student Equity: Overcoming Barriers and Providing Support study and Student Support Services Experiences Study, which relied on quantitative (online/phone) surveys.^{35,36} This study focused on obtaining feedback from three student groups who: 1) attempted to enroll, but did not attend; 2) enrolled, but paused their studies; and 3) attended and completed their educational goals.

Project Timeline

First, the San Diego & Imperial COE conducted a literature review focused on how adult learners are defined, characteristics of their experiences, and barriers they face. This review was conducted November 2024 to January 2025. The San Diego & Imperial COE also reviewed several existing regional, statewide, and national student surveys. These insights guided the development of the online survey.

An advisory group formed in February 2025 to provide feedback and guidance, and who met periodically during this research to discuss project progress and updates. Upon development of the survey instrument, the advisory group reviewed and provided feedback. The COE programmed and tested the survey for quality assurance. In May 2025, the COE submitted this study for Institutional Review Board review, per Southwestern College.

Recruitment & Data Collection

To reach students, the San Diego & Imperial COE contacted Institutional Research offices at the 10 local community colleges for student contact information and specified the following criteria: had enrolled or attempted to between January 1, 2021 to September 30, 2024 but were no longer enrolled after this period and were between the ages of 25 and 64. The final survey lists were received early June, and surveys were distributed from July and August 2025. Students were contacted via email to participate in the survey, or by phone if available. A \$5 digital gift card was awarded to all respondents as an incentive. Responses with less than 80% of the survey completed were excluded from analysis. Although the research team

³⁵ "Black Student Equity: Overcoming Barriers and Providing Support," San Diego & Imperial COE, May 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, coeccc.net/san-diego-imperial/2023/05/black-student-equity.

³⁶ "Student Support Services Experiences Study," San Diego & Imperial COE, May 2024, accessed October 1, 2025, coeccc.net/san-diego-imperial/2024/05/student-support-services-experiences-study.

attempted

to reach prospective students, only 26 students completed the survey. The research team encourages the colleges to conduct more in-depth feedback from this student group.

Data Analysis

The research team cleaned the dataset to include only surveys that were more than 80% complete. All respondents either attended or attempted to enroll at a San Diego & Imperial Community College, resulting in an initial sample of 651 respondents. Responses from students who never enrolled at a community college, or students who did not enroll at a community college in the region were then excluded. Although the team collected some responses from individuals who attempted to enroll but did not attend, the sample was small ($n=27$). Responses from these students can be found in the Appendix, Exhibit 24 to 26. The main body of the report focuses on adult learners who attended a community college and completed their educational goals, or attended and did not complete, resulting in a final sample of 621 respondents. To examine differences between completers and non-completers, the research team conducted z-tests to compare proportions, chi-square analyses to assess associations between categorical variables, and logistic regression analyses to identify predictors of completion. Statistical significance was set at $p<.05$ for all tests. All quantitative analyses were performed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics.

Appendix C: Survey Instrument

Adult Learner Experience Survey

1. Which of the following best describes your experience with community colleges?
 - a. I attempted to enroll but was unable to [Group 1]
 - b. I registered for classes but never attended [Group 1]
 - c. I attended community college but have not completed my educational goals (e.g., degree, certificate, transfer) [Group 2]
 - d. I attended community college and completed my educational goals (e.g., degree, certificate, transfer) [Group 3]
 - e. I never enrolled or attempted to enroll at a community college [end survey]

Split participants into three groups based on previous question

- Group 1: Attempted to enroll
 - Group 2: Enrolled but dropped out
 - Group 3: Completed their goals
 - Group 1: Attempted to enroll
2. What was your primary goal for attempting to enroll in a community college? [Choices randomized except last]
 - a. Earn a community college bachelor's degree (these are degrees earned at community colleges only, not earned after transferring to a four-year college or university)
 - b. Transfer to a bachelor-degree granting college or university
 - c. Earn an associate degree
 - d. Earn a certificate or credential (programs with fewer than 60 units or are completed in less than 2 years)
 - e. Complete an apprenticeship program
 - f. Take classes to update job skills or renew a license/permit
 - g. Take classes for self-enrichment only
 - h. Other, please specify
 3. What program(s) of study (degree, certificate, or major) did you pursue at the community college? [open-ended]

4. What were the reasons you were unable to attend community college? Select all that apply. [Choices randomized except last]
- a. I didn't have time for coursework
 - b. I could not afford courses and the associated costs (such as textbooks or transportation)
 - c. The courses I needed were not available
 - d. I did not feel comfortable or welcome at the college
 - e. I moved outside the San Diego & Imperial region
 - f. Class schedules conflicted with my work
 - g. I had caregiving responsibilities (for children and/or dependent adults)
 - h. The courses were not relevant or useful to me
 - i. The enrollment process was confusing or difficult
 - j. I didn't know where to get help
 - k. I decided to attend a different institution
 - l. Other, please specify
5. Thinking back to when you most recently attempted to enroll in community college, how many hours did you spend during a typical week on each of the following activities? Scale: 0 - 80 Hours [Participants cannot progress unless their total weekly hours is < 168]
- a. Working for pay
 - b. Providing care for dependents (parents, children, spouse, other family members, etc.)
 - c. Commuting to work
6. Thinking back to when you most recently attempted to enroll, what percentage of your income did you spend on housing (e.g., rent, mortgage)?
- [0-100%]--if over 50%, ask them to confirm before moving on
7. Community colleges offer a variety of support services for students. If you were enrolled, which services would you use? Select all that apply. [Choices randomized except last]
- a. Career center services (career planning, career counseling, internships, job search help)
 - b. Child development center (childcare services)
 - c. Services for specialized groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+ students, veterans, individuals with disabilities, undocumented students)
 - d. Financial assistance (scholarships)
 - e. Basic needs assistance (e.g., diapers, food, transportation, housing)
 - f. Health services (physical health support)
 - g. Library access (book rental, computer lab, study space)

- h. Community-building activities (student clubs, athletics)
 - i. Academic support (academic advising, tutoring, transfer support)
 - j. Personal or mental health counseling services
 - k. English language support services (ESL, etc.)
 - l. None of the above [Exclusive]
8. If you were to take courses in the future, which format(s) would work best for you? Select all that apply.
- a. In-person courses
 - b. Online courses with live sessions (real-time instruction)
 - c. Online courses with recorded sessions (asynchronous, self-paced)
 - d. Hybrid courses (a mix of in-person and online instruction)
9. What could the community colleges have done to support you when you attempted to enroll? Select all that apply.
- a. Simplify the enrollment process
 - b. Reach out personally to offer support or guidance
 - c. Provide childcare so I can attend classes
 - d. Make financial aid options easier to understand
 - e. Offer more flexible class schedules (evenings, weekends, online)
 - f. Make required classes more available (not limited to specific semesters)
 - g. Help me explore career options and their related academic pathways or majors
 - h. Make it easier to contact someone about my questions or concerns
 - i. Other, please specify

Group 2: Enrolled but dropped out

10. At which of the following community colleges have you taken a course? Select all that apply.
- a. Cuyamaca College
 - b. Grossmont College
 - c. Imperial Valley College
 - d. MiraCosta College
 - e. Palomar College
 - f. San Diego City College
 - g. San Diego College of Continuing Education
 - h. San Diego Mesa College
 - i. San Diego Miramar College
 - j. Southwestern College
 - k. I have not taken a course at any of these community colleges [Exclusive]

- 11.** What was your primary goal for attempting to enroll in a community college? [Choices randomized except last]
- a. Earn a community college bachelor's degree (these are degrees earned at community colleges only, not earned after transferring to a four-year college or university)
 - b. Transfer to a bachelor-degree granting college or university
 - c. Earn an associate degree
 - d. Earn a certificate or credential (programs with fewer than 60 units or are completed in less than 2 years)
 - e. Complete an apprenticeship program
 - f. Take classes to update job skills or renew a license/permit
 - g. Take classes for self-enrichment only
 - h. Other, please specify
- 12.** What were the main reasons you paused or stopped your community college studies? Select all that apply. [Choices randomized except last]
- a. I didn't have time for coursework
 - b. I could not afford courses and the associated costs (such as textbooks or transportation)
 - c. The courses I needed were not available
 - d. I did not feel comfortable or welcome at the college
 - e. I moved outside the San Diego & Imperial region
 - f. Class schedules conflicted with my work
 - g. I had caregiving responsibilities (for children and/or dependent adults)
 - h. The courses were not relevant or useful to me
 - i. The enrollment process was confusing or difficult
 - j. I didn't know where to get help
 - k. I decided to attend a different institution [if this is selected, skip next two questions]
 - l. Other, please specify
- 13.** Do you intend to continue your education in the future?
- a. Yes, I intend to continue my education in the next 12 months
 - b. I might continue my education in the future, but no immediate plans in the next 12 months
 - c. No, I do not intend to continue my education [skip next question]
- 14.** Do you plan to continue your education at a community college?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

Group 3: Completed their goals

15. At which of the following community colleges have you taken a course? Select all that apply.

- a. Cuyamaca College
- b. Grossmont College
- c. Imperial Valley College
- d. MiraCosta College
- e. Palomar College
- f. San Diego City College
- g. San Diego College of Continuing Education
- h. San Diego Mesa College
- i. San Diego Miramar College
- j. Southwestern College
- k. I have not taken a course at any of these community colleges [Exclusive] [ask them to confirm before ending survey]

16. What was your primary goal for enrolling in a community college? [Choices randomized except last]

- a. Earn a community college bachelor's degree (these are degrees earned at community colleges only, not earned after transferring to a four-year college or university)
- b. Transfer to a bachelor-degree granting college or university
- c. Earn an associate degree
- d. Earn a certificate or credential (typically these programs have fewer than 60 units or are completed in less than 2 years)
- e. Complete an apprenticeship program
- f. Take classes to update job skills or renew a license/permit
- g. Take classes for self-enrichment only
- h. Other, please specify

Community College Experience [only shown to groups 2 & 3]

Please think back to the most recent semester you were enrolled to answer the following questions.

17. How many hours did you spend during a typical week on each of the following activities? Scale: 0 - 80 Hours [Participants cannot progress unless their total weekly hours is < 168]

- a. Preparing for and attending class
- b. Working for pay
- c. Providing care for dependents (parents, children, spouse, other family)

- members)
- d. Participating in college activities (clubs, student government, sports, other college events)
 - e. Commuting to work
 - f. Commuting to school
- 18.** Thinking back to when you were enrolled, what percentage of your income did you spend on housing (e.g., rent, mortgage)?
- [0-100%]--if over 50%, ask them to confirm before moving on
- 19.** Which course format worked best for you?
- a. In-person courses
 - b. Online courses with live sessions (real-time instruction)
 - c. Online courses with recorded sessions (asynchronous, self-paced)
 - d. Hybrid courses (a mix of in-person and online instruction)
- 20.** What program(s) of study (degree, certificate, or major) did you pursue at the community college? [Open-ended]
- 21.** How satisfied were you with your education and training at the community college?
- a. Very satisfied (5)
 - b. Satisfied (4)
 - c. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)
 - d. Dissatisfied (2)
 - e. Very dissatisfied (1)

[If d & e] To help us improve, why were you dissatisfied with your education and training at the community college? [Open-ended]

- 22.** How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your experience at the community college? [Choices randomized]

Likert: 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neither agree or disagree, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree

My time at the community colleges was a worthwhile investment					
The college provided resources and opportunities that were accessible to me					
College staff treated me with respect					
I felt connected to other students at the college					
The college had a welcoming environment					
My instructors cared about my success					

23. Which of the following free support services did you use? Select all that apply.

[Choices randomized except last]

- a. Career center services (career planning, career counseling, internships, job search help)
- b. Child development center (childcare services)
- c. Services for specialized groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+ students, veterans, individuals with disabilities, undocumented students)
- d. Financial assistance (scholarships)
- e. Basic needs assistance (e.g., diapers, food, transportation, housing)
- f. Health services (physical health support)
- g. Library access (book rental, computer lab, study space)
- h. Community-building activities (student clubs, athletics)
- i. Academic support (academic advising, tutoring, transfer support)
- j. Personal or mental health counseling services
- k. English language support services (ESL, etc.)
- l. None of the above [Exclusive]

24. Which of the following would have been most helpful in completing your education?

Select all that apply. [Choices randomized except last two]

- a. Flexible class schedules (evenings, weekends, online)
- b. Short-term, accelerated courses (e.g., 4-6 weeks)
- c. More financial aid opportunities
- d. Childcare services during class hours
- e. Transportation assistance
- f. Programs offered fully online
- g. Internship opportunities
- h. More community-building activities (clubs, events, etc.)
- i. None of the above [Exclusive]
- j. Other, please specify

25. How likely would you use the following services if they were offered outside regular business hours (evenings or weekends)? 4=very likely; 3=likely, 2=somewhat likely, 1=not likely [Choices randomized]

- a. Health services (physical or mental health support)
- a. Academic support (e.g., academic counseling, tutoring)
- b. Career center services (career counseling, internships, job search help)
- c. Community-building activities (e.g., student clubs, athletics)
- d. Library access (book rental, computer lab, study space)
- e. Services specialized for certain groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+ students, veterans, individuals with disabilities)
- f. Admission & records
- g. Financial aid services

Employment Questions [Groups 2 & 3]

This section asks questions about your current employment status. Your responses will help us understand how community college programs helped support our regional economy.

26. Which best describes your current employment status?

- a. Employed at one full-time job
- b. Employed at one part-time job
- c. Employed at multiple jobs
- d. Self-employed
- e. Working, but not for pay (including caregiving, volunteer work, stay-at-home parenting, unpaid internship, or other unpaid work-based learning)
- f. Unemployed
- g. Retired

27. What is your current job title? [Only show for a-e in Q26] [open-ended]

28. How closely related to your current employment was your program of study?

- a. Very close—my current employment is in the same field as my coursework and training
- b. Close -- I use what I learned in my coursework and training even though I am not employed in the exact same field
- c. Not close -- my coursework and training are not at all related to my current employment

29. What impact did your education/coursework at the community college have on your employment? Select all that apply.

- a. Received a promotion
- b. Received a pay/wage increase
- c. Found full-time employment
- d. Found part-time employment
- e. Started my own business
- f. Provided me with skills/training or credential(s) to use in my current employment.
- g. No impact on my employment [Exclusive]
- h. Other, please specify

30. Which of the following ranges best represents your total annual income from all jobs before taxes or deductions (your gross annual income)?

- a. Less than \$20,000
- b. \$20,001 - \$30,000
- c. \$30,001 - \$40,000

- d. \$40,001 - \$50,000
- e. \$50,001 - \$60,000
- f. \$60,001 - \$70,000
- g. \$70,001 - \$80,000
- h. \$80,001 - \$90,000
- i. \$90,001 - \$100,000
- j. Over \$100,000
- k. I am unsure of my annual income
- l. Prefer not to answer

Demographic Section [Groups 1, 2 & 3]

This section includes a few demographic questions. Your responses will help us improve community college programs and services for people with similar backgrounds.

31. What is your age range?

- a. 17 and below
- b. 18 - 24
- c. 25 - 34
- d. 35 - 44
- e. 45 - 54
- f. 55 - 64
- g. 65 and above
- h. Prefer not to answer

32. What is your race/ethnicity? Select all that apply.

- a. American Indian or Alaska Native
- b. Asian or Asian American
- c. Black or African American
- d. Hispanic or Latinx/o/a/é
- e. Filipino/a/x
- f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- g. Middle Eastern or North African
- h. White
- i. Other (please specify):
- j. Prefer not to answer [Exclusive]

33. Which of the following best describes your gender?

- a. Woman
- b. Man
- c. Non-binary
- d. Prefer to self-describe: _____
- e. Prefer not to answer

- 34.** Do any of the following apply to you? Select all that apply. [Choices randomized except last two]
- a. U.S. Veteran or active duty
 - b. First-generation college student (e.g., parents did not graduate from college)
 - c. Caregiver for adult(s) 18 years old or older
 - d. Parent to child(ren) under 18 years old
 - e. Person with physical or mental disability
 - f. Dependent on third-party transportation or public transportation
 - g. Single parent
 - h. English language learner
 - i. Homeless individual
 - j. Currently or previously in the foster care system
 - k. Low-income resident (e.g., receiving TANF/SSI/General Assistance)
 - l. Formerly incarcerated, on probation/parole, or impacted by the justice system
 - m. Refugee or asylee
 - n. None of the above [Exclusive]
 - o. Prefer not to answer [Exclusive]
- 35.** What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- a. Some high school, did not graduate
 - b. High school graduate (diploma, GED, or equivalent)
 - c. Some college credit, no degree
 - d. Associate degree (AA, AS)
 - e. Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)
 - f. Graduate degree (Master's, Ph.D)
 - g. Prefer not to answer

Closing Questions & Comments

- 36.** Do you have any additional questions or comments you would like to share with the community colleges? [open-ended]
- 37.** Are you interested in participating in our online focus group to provide additional feedback? If selected to participate, you will receive an additional \$20 gift card for your time.
- a. Yes
 - b. No

If you'd like to receive compensation for completing the survey or are interested in joining a focus group, please provide your name and contact information below.

First name

Last name

Email address

Phone number

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Important Disclaimers and Limitations

All representations included in this report have been produced from primary research and/or secondary review of publicly and/or privately available data and/or research reports. This study examines the most recent data available at the time of the analysis; however, data sets are updated regularly and may not be consistent with previous reports. Efforts have been made to represent data that is available and to qualify and validate the accuracy of the data; however, neither the Centers of Excellence for Labor Market Research (COE), COE host district, nor California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office are responsible for the applications or decisions made by individuals and/or organizations based on this report or its recommendations.