

Class of 2020 Persists During COVID-19 Pandemic

Additional support needed for adult learners

By Teresa Lubbers, Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education

Despite an unforeseen learning disruption, Indiana's Class of 2020 graduated at higher rates than in 2019.

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education's latest [College Completion Report](#) shows an overall increase in the state's college completion rates from the previous year and increasing trends over the past five years. At four-year public institutions, more than 7 out of 10 students graduate within six years. At Purdue University West Lafayette, the number is nearly 9 in 10. About 2 out of 5 students who pursue an associate degree or long-term certificate earn one within six years, up slightly since 2019.

On-time completion rates at four-year institutions increased by roughly two percentage points since 2019 and 10.4 percentage points since 2015. Indiana University Bloomington's completion rate was the highest of all four-year institutions, with 71.8 percent of students completing within four years. Two-year campuses saw a 9.3 percentage point increase of on-time completion over five years.

I want to celebrate the graduates who persevered and obtained their degree during so much disruption. I also want to applaud the swift actions and additional efforts taken by Indiana's higher education institutions, faculty, administrators and families to help students succeed.

College completion has remained the foundational goal for Indiana's higher education landscape and our most powerful tool to measure success. When learners pursue and complete credentials that provide individual opportunity, it also strengthens the state's economy.

21st Century Scholars make strides

The [21st Century Scholars](#) program, Indiana's early college promise program, provides up to four years of tuition to income-eligible students. The on-time completion rate for Scholars from two-year institutions has nearly tripled over the past five years. Our data show their on-time completion rate is nine percentage points higher than their non-Scholar, low-income peers.

Scholars receive wraparound support at both the high school and college level through the Scholar Success Program. The program helps students stay on track to earn and maintain the 21st Century Scholarship with college- and career-ready activities.

Adult learners most affected

While non-Scholar, low-income and minority students saw improvements in college completion rates, it would still take years to fully close the remaining gaps. Unfortunately, our most recent data show adult learners' graduation rates were most affected in the early part of the pandemic. There was a more than two percentage point drop between 2019 and 2020. The pandemic and economic recession put a strain on the unique issues adult learners already faced such as childcare, balancing full-time employment and financial barriers.

Grants are available

Ensuring affordability remains a key strategic focus in the Commission's fourth strategic plan, [Reaching Higher in a State of Change](#). We are keenly aware that the cost of postsecondary education can be a major barrier for many adult learners.

Indiana ranks fourth in the country – and first in the Midwest – for providing need-based financial aid. The state offers more than \$350 million annually in aid for high school graduates and college students. Indiana provides additional programs for adult learners to take advantage of such programs as the [Next Level Jobs](#) Workforce Ready Grant, which provides free statewide training in five of the state’s high-paying, in-demand industries.

The [You Can. Go Back.](#) program aims to help Hoosier adults with some college but no degree finish what they started with the help of the Adult Student Grant. The \$2,000 grant may be used toward tuition and regularly assessed fees.

Indiana is less than four years away from the 60 percent attainment goal. Our efforts are focused on increasing higher education’s value proposition to all Hoosiers, especially low-income, minority and adult learners.

Teresa Lubbers is Indiana’s Commissioner for Higher Education and chair of the Governor’s Workforce Cabinet.

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