

Return and Complete Guidance for Indiana's Public Colleges and Universities

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately 30 to 35 million Americans have completed some college credit without earning a degree or credential.¹ In Indiana, where policymakers hope to achieve a 60 percent higher education attainment rate by 2025, this population represents a significant opportunity. By encouraging these former students to return to college, Indiana can make significant progress towards its college completion goals, strengthening its workforce and improving the financial prospects for thousands of Hoosiers. The Commission has calculated that to meet the 60 percent goal, approximately 200,000 adults need to return to college and complete their degrees. With nearly 750,000 Hoosiers already having earned some college credit but no degree, this population is a clear target to meet the 200,000 goal and is the focus of this initiative.

Established by the Indiana General Assembly during the 2015 legislative session (IC 21-18-14), the Return and Complete project aims to encourage adult “stop out” students to complete a degree or credential by 2020. The Act directs the Commission for Higher Education to work in consultation with state educational institutions to provide guidance for taking this initiative to scale, including:

- Procedures for administering the Return and Complete initiative
- Guidelines for direct student outreach

The purpose of this document is to provide said guidance. This guidance has been developed with input and direction from 25 university representatives, spanning various functions of administration and with representation from each of the public institutions and some private institutions. The recommendations are in large part drawn from the work done and lessons learned by colleges and universities with the returning adult population prior to the establishment of this new mandate.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Likely completers: students whose number of credits and amount of time spent in (and out of) college make them more likely to return to college and earn their credential. For the initial round of outreach, the Commission is requesting that institutions prioritize students with the following characteristics:

- Earned at least 15 credits (for 2-year institutions)
- Earned at least 30 credits (for 4-year institutions)
- Attended more than one term
- Last attended within ten years

Reverse transfer: transfer of credits earned toward a baccalaureate degree to an associate degree or certificate program, either automatically by the institution or upon request by the student.

Predictable scheduling: a schedule intentionally designed to require the student to be on campus the same days and times of day for each academic term for the duration of the program.

Consolidated scheduling: a schedule intentionally designed to limit the number of trips a student must make to campus and limit time between courses during those trips.

¹ https://higheredinsight.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/adult_college_completion_20151.pdf: “Adult College Completion in the 21st Century: What We Know and What We Don’t.” Wendy Erisman and Patricia Steele, Higher Ed Insight, June 2015, 7.

Concierge: individual (or an office at the larger institutions) trained to help ready adults navigate the application, enrollment, and registration process in the same way that a hotel concierge assists its guests in finding activities or restaurants that suit their needs or interests.

Core messages: Elements of the Return and Complete messaging campaign that should appear on all direct outreach and other marketing, whether done by the Commission, institutions or other partners.

PREPARING FOR RETURN AND COMPLETE

Adult students in college face significant challenges. Some have gone years without formal schooling. Many have to maintain important personal obligations. Nearly all must find a way to pay for their education.

But former students with prior credit often face an additional set of challenges. Transferring credit among institutions, for example, can be a daunting process: students must collect transcripts and compare credit-transfer policies across multiple institutions, and many find that they cannot have their credits evaluated until *after* they enroll in a program. Other challenges cited by adult returners include financial or academic “holds” on student accounts, difficulty securing financial aid, and an admissions system that is hard to navigate for individuals with commitments during normal business hours.² Before encouraging these students to return, institutions should ensure that their policies and practices have been evaluated and, if necessary, modified to make the transition back to and through college as smooth as possible.

Objective 1: Establish policies and procedures that make it easier for adults to navigate the admissions process and re-enroll in college.

Boosting completion among adult students with prior credit will require institutions to both expand their service offerings and modify the way in which those services are delivered. To facilitate these changes, institutions should enact a set of policies that would ease the re-entry process for adult returners. The Commission will include an inventory and side-by-side comparison of adult-friendly policies adopted by each institution on its Learn More Indiana website. Suggested policies include:

- **Establishing a single point of contact, or “concierge,” for prospective returning adults.** Indiana institutions have conveyed the effectiveness of a single point of contact model for serving returning adults. The Lumina-funded NonTraditional No More project, led by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, describes this role as a “concierge” – an “individual (or an office at the larger institutions) trained to help ready adults navigate the application, enrollment, and registration process in the same way that a hotel concierge assists its guests in finding activities or restaurants that suit their needs or interests.”³ The most effective concierge would meet four key criteria:

Trained and empowered to interact with on-campus administrative offices on a student’s behalf.

Students become easily frustrated when they have to work with multiple offices at the same institution. Having to learn the jargon and procedures of different offices can be confusing. A concierge should be able to discuss the student’s needs with each of these offices on the student’s behalf and provide the student with clear direction about what the student must do to attend classes at that institution.

² “Adult College Completion,” 14, 24-25.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

Willing and able to refer students to another institution if appropriate to the student's goals. Although advisors will likely encourage students to return to their own institution, returning students should be made aware of the opportunity to transfer credits to other institutions and/or to apply them toward an associate degree or certificate. In the event that a returning student expresses a desire to attend a different institution or the concierge identifies that another institution's program offering or structure is better aligned to the student's career goals, the student should be referred to the concierge for that institution.

Able to help returning students apply for federal, state and community services for food, housing, childcare and other needs to supplement traditional financial aid. Because many prospective returners are eligible for public benefits, more institutions are taking steps to connect their students to these resources. The college's concierge should be able to provide students with a comprehensive "basket" of resources available to support their needs and those of their family while they attend school. The spirit of this recommendation is in line with Strategy 1.3 of Indiana Career Council's 2014 Strategic Plan, which called for a client-centered approach (rather than an agency-by-agency approach) to administering state and federal benefits for housing, childcare, food assistance and college and career training.⁴ The Commission will work with other state agencies to provide resources to equip the concierge in this task. The concierge should also work with the student to follow through and ensure benefits are received.

Available outside of traditional office hours. Like a hotel concierge, such a resource should be available outside of normal business hours. Although it would be unreasonable to ask institutions to staff a call center or office around the clock, it is important, for the purpose of reaching and providing timely information to adult students, that this resource be readily available.

- **Granting tuition discounts and other financial incentives.** Institutions can help alleviate concerns students have about financing their education by offering institutional aid or tuition discounts to this population. If offered on a limited-time basis (e.g., only through AY 19-20), such financial assistance could help create a sense of urgency for adults to return.
- **Offering limited-time forgiveness for academic and/or financial holds.** Students hoping to transfer credit between institutions are required to secure copies of their official academic transcripts. But many students who leave college prematurely incur various fines and charges that remain on their student accounts long after they depart. While academic holds typically only prohibit the student from re-enrolling in the same institution, financial holds often prohibit both re-enrollment and the release of the student's transcript, leaving the prospective student with no options for returning before paying off the debt. Many institutions in Indiana already offer forgiveness for *academic* holds, granting clemency for poor grades to students who have been out a certain amount of time (most often 3 years). With regard to *financial* holds, some institutions will re-enroll students despite their unpaid balance. However, none of Indiana's institutions currently release transcripts if a student has an outstanding balance, no matter how small.

⁴ http://www.in.gov/icc/files/Indiana_Career_Council_Strategic_Plan_-_Align_Engage_Advance_-_FINAL.pdf

"Align, Engage, Advance: A Strategic Plan to Transform Indiana's Workforce," Indiana Career Council, June 2014, 18.

The Commission suggests, but does not require, that institutions:

- Re-enroll admitted students owing \$500 or less without requiring that the debt be paid prior to registration.
- Not prohibit the release of transcripts if a student owes \$250 or less
- Create a policy to forgive debt or allow a student to earn forgiveness of some or all of the debt through future academic performance and/or demonstration of financial responsibility
- Grant academic forgiveness for students who have been stopped out for at least three years or can articulate factors that make the student more likely to succeed academically now (e.g., a student was caring for a sick relative during the period of poor performance but is no longer doing so)

Objective 2: Develop initiatives and resources that promote the academic success of adult students once they have returned to college.

Getting adult students through the door is only the beginning. To make Return and Complete a success, it is equally important to establish policies and resources that enable adult students to be successful once they have returned to college.

- **Offer associate degree and certificate options.** Students with 60 or more credits earned toward a baccalaureate degree may in fact be eligible to receive an associate degree or certificate and should be made aware of that opportunity. In Indiana, Hoosiers with 60 or more credits who wish to receive an associate degree fit into two categories:
 - **Students who earned at least 15 credits at a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year institution.** These students, if they have met all the degree requirements for an associate degree, can in most cases be granted an associate degree by the two-year institution they previously attended without taking any additional coursework. These students simply need to provide their transcript to the two-year institution and ask for a degree audit. For those close to achieving an associate degree, additional coursework needed would be identified as part of the degree audit. Each two-year institution should provide a point of contact to the Commission for assistance with credit transfer and the degree audit.
 - **Students who did not earn at least 15 credits at a two-year institution.** This group poses additional challenges. To establish academic residency to receive an associate degree from a two-year institution, these students would need to take 15 credits at the two-year institution even if the student does not need those credits to meet degree requirements. However, four-year institutions at which the student has established academic residency have limited or no approved associate degrees to confer. The Commission, by means of this guidance, signals that it will permit A.A. and A.S. degrees (with the potential to add concentrations) to be conferred by four-year institutions under very limited circumstances. Institutions with these programs still in place but “off-books” per Commission guidance may utilize those programs. Institutions without such programs may bring new A.A. and A.S. programs before the Commission for approval. Conferral of A.A. and A.S. degrees should be limited to students who meet all of the following criteria:
 - Already stopped out or has indicated an intent to stop out
 - Has 14 or fewer credits earned from a community college
 - Needs 14 or fewer credits to earn an associate degree

Students not meeting all three of the above criteria should be referred to a two-year institution to pursue an associate degree.

- **Make opportunities for prior learning assessments transparent to students.** Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs) evaluate skills and knowledge gained outside a traditional academic environment – whether through working, serving in the military, studying independently, or performing community service. Postsecondary institutions use PLAs to award credit, certification, or advanced standing to individuals pursuing higher education. This practice is particularly important for returning adults. In fact, after examining data on 62,475 adult students at 48 colleges and universities across the country, the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning found that graduation rates were two and a half times higher for students who had earned PLA credit, results that are likely driven in part by shortened time to degree and reduced cost. Although Indiana’s institutions have accepted PLA credit for years, there is room for progress when it comes to promoting this option and specifying how a student’s test score will translate into academic credit.⁵
- **Institute condensed and predictable scheduling (to limit trips to campus and unusable time between classes).** Adult-oriented institutions and programs have long tried to accommodate the schedules of busy, working adults by offering classes on nights and weekends. Recent research, however, suggests that more can be done to overcome the scheduling barriers of adult students. For-profit institutions have pioneered several innovative scheduling models that could be (and in many cases have been) adapted by their public and private non-profit peers. These include accelerated, condensed classes that enable students to take multiple courses sequentially over the duration of a single term (instead of all at once); “modular” classes that segment courses into smaller, more manageable pieces; and more liberal entry/exit policies whereby students may drop a class in one term and resume where they left off in a later term.⁶ Institutions wary of these experimental models can still institute more traditional forms of condensed and/or predictable scheduling as described in the definitions section of this document. Both techniques provide a measure of stability and consistency critical to the success of working adults, many of whom must negotiate special arrangements with employers and child care providers.
- **Extend office hours for administrative offices that will continue to be utilized throughout (e.g., bursar).** Many institutions offer night and weekend classes, but many students who go to campus outside of traditional business hours find that administrative support services such as the bursar, financial aid offices and others are closed. Institutions are encouraged to make these administrative services available whenever classes are being held, including evenings and weekends, or to allow the after-hours concierge to continue serving as the student’s advocate throughout the duration of the student’s program. If institutions face constraints with staffing resources, the extended hours could be limited to peak demand times during the semester for that particular office.

Before September 30, 2015, institutions should provide the Commission with details about policies developed for the Return and Complete population under Objectives 1 and 2, as well as the contact information for the institution’s concierge so that the Commission may publicize these benefits through its outreach materials and website and allow students to compare the benefits offered at various institutions.

⁵ “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes,” Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (March 2010), 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

LAUNCHING RETURN AND COMPLETE

After establishing policies and procedures that make it easier re-enroll in and graduate from college, the focus needs to shift to reaching these prospective returners. In collaboration with its postsecondary partners, the Commission will conduct an outreach and marketing campaign to promote the Return and Complete project.

Objective 3: Publicize the importance of college completion to a wide audience while conducting targeted outreach to individuals with some college but no degree.

The Commission will play a leading role in some aspects of this project, and a coordinating or support role in others. This section details the Commission's obligations and commitments as well as those of institutions.

Campaign Outreach and Marketing

The advantage of a general outreach campaign lies in its breadth: by saturating a range of print, digital, and social media – not to mention secondary coverage in news outlets – the Commission is more likely to reach prospective returners across all parts of the state. This population could include students who attended an Indiana institution but for whom that institution lacks up-to-date contact information, or former students who are included in a lower priority outreach group for direct outreach (e.g., those who have not attended for 30 years). It also could include students who moved to Indiana after earning credit at an out-of-state institution. In short, a general campaign has the capacity to reach pockets of students that the targeted outreach does not.

Besides its reach, another benefit of a general outreach campaign is its capacity to generate word-of-mouth publicity which research suggests is especially vital for swaying prospective adult students. According to a survey conducted by the research and advocacy organization Public Agenda, among adults who plan to enroll in college in the next two years – 55% of whom already have some college credit – the most frequently cited source of information about college opportunities were friends, family, and colleagues.

The Commission will lead the general outreach campaign through three distinct avenues:

- **Employers:** Working with the Indiana Career Council, Regional Works Councils, Department of Workforce Development and State and Local Chambers of Commerce, the Commission will ask employers to encourage their employees to go back to school and support them with financial assistance and flexibility when they do.
- **State and Local Partners:** In partnership with all state agencies (particularly those with high levels of interaction with the public), local government organizations, Veteran's groups, and others, we will create avenues for the Return and Complete message and materials to be widely distributed.
- **Media:** The Commission will use social media and earned media to spread the word about Return and Complete.

Given the multiple avenues through which the Return and Complete message will be shared, it is critical that all partners, including institutions, use common language and perhaps even common graphics on materials so that Hoosiers understand the connectivity of the efforts underway and view it as a single, statewide campaign instead of coincidental, overlapping efforts. This will enable the efforts to build upon one another and improve the effectiveness of each. The rest of this section will provide details about the required content and procedures to ensure that this is the case.

Key Campaign Messages

The Commission has contracted with a private marketing firm to develop the overarching slogan and messages for the campaign. The overarching slogan for the campaign is “You Can. Go Back.” Supplemental messages will be included on a banner with the default text as shown below:




A lot has changed since you left college.
LIKE YOU, FOR INSTANCE.

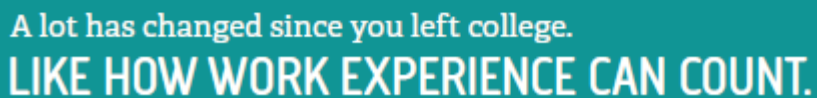
Alternate versions of this banner will be used as well, using the standard first line and a customizable second line. Such examples include:



A lot has changed since you left college.
LIKE FLEXIBLE CLASS SCHEDULES.



A lot has changed since you left college.
LIKE ACCREDITED ONLINE DEGREES.



A lot has changed since you left college.
LIKE HOW WORK EXPERIENCE CAN COUNT.

Outreach and Marketing Package

During the month of August, the Commission will provide institutions with a “partnership package” detailing the services the Commission will perform on the institution’s behalf if the institution chooses to partner with the Commission. This will include full satisfaction of statutory obligations plus additional services.

Should an institution choose to do outreach independently, at least the following **core messages** should be included:

- The slogan “You Can. Go Back.”
- A banner that begins with the phrase “A lot has changed since you left college. Like...”
- While colors of these items may be customized, please utilize the prescribed font and shape of the banner to ensure consistency of the look and feel of the campaign. Further information will be provided in August.

Institutions may also opt to utilize various templates with the look and feel of the campaign that incorporate core messages but allow institution-specific customization which the Commission will make available free of charge during the month of August.

Direct Outreach Procedures

Prior to the campaign launch, there are several next steps for institutions:

- **Review campaign partnership offer, which will be provided by the Commission.** The Commission will provide institutions with a package of marketing materials for the campaign should they choose to partner with the Commission. This will provide more detail on the opportunity described in the previous section for institutions electing to have the Commission do outreach on their behalf. The Commission will provide institutions with the partnership offer on or before [August 31](#).
- **Determine campaign approach by September 4.** By statute, Indiana’s postsecondary institutions are charged with either conducting their own targeted outreach to students with some college but no degree, or providing the necessary data the Commission would need to conduct targeted outreach on the institution’s behalf. Institutions should make this determination by [September 4](#).
 - If partnering with the Commission, exchange necessary data for direct student outreach by [September 30](#) (see Data Exchange section below for details).
 - If not partnering with the Commission, integrate the core messages into outreach materials before any further outreach is conducted.
- **Determine Return and Complete population policies and point of contact by September 30.**
- **Establish a campaign-consistent email address (youcan.goback@university.edu) that will reach the concierge.** This will make it very easy for prospective students to know how to reach the concierge, allow websites and other materials to remain up-to-date despite changes to the person serving as concierge and accommodate larger institutions with an entire office fulfilling the concierge function.
- **Contact outreach to likely completers by March 1, 2016.** The Commission has developed a prioritization schema to identify “likely completers” – students whose number of credits and amount of time spent in (and out of) college make them more likely to return to college and earn their credential. For the initial round of outreach, institutions should prioritize students with the following characteristics:
 - Earned at least 15 credits (for 2-year institutions)
 - Earned at least 30 credits (for 4-year institutions)
 - Attended more than one term
 - Last attended within ten years

Ideally, the bulk of the notifications would be sent between January 1 and March 1 of 2016 so that returning students are able to meet the March 10 FAFSA filing deadline and the institution’s application deadline. However, institutions may determine an optimal timeframe for the notifications, provided that students who meet the criteria above are notified by [March 1, 2016](#). Institutions should continue reaching out to additional segments of former students after March 1 according to their own prioritization criteria.

Data Exchange

The Commission, in collaboration with the institutional research offices of the institutions, will develop data file specifications for the exchange of data between the institutions and the Commission. The specifications will be distributed at a later date. Key data elements to be shared as part of the partnership will be conveyed in August.

REPORT RESULTS

Objective 4: Measure and report results to improve adult completion in Indiana and contribute to the growing body of knowledge around adult completion strategies.

Institutions are required, pursuant to IC 21-18-14-8, to report to the Commission by **November 1** of each year (beginning in 2016) the number of return and complete students who have received targeted outreach from the institution and who have earned an associate or baccalaureate degree or a technical certificate from the institution. The Commission will provide a template for institutions conducting their own outreach to do so. The Commission will handle the data collection on behalf of institutions that partner with the Commission for direct outreach.