

Postsecondary access without a high school diploma: Lessons from Louisiana's Five for Six Scholarship

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of community colleges as an access point to higher education, specifically for individuals without a high school diploma. The article highlights how one community college system is addressing both postsecondary access and workforce demands through policy and practice change. The Louisiana Community and Technical College System's (LCTCS) *Five for Six Scholarship* provides individuals without a high school diploma a path towards college and a credential that can lead to a high-wage, high-demand career. Ultimately, other community college leaders and practitioners can learn from the positive findings of this unique policy and practice in Louisiana, which is proving that educational pathways are not always linear.

INTRODUCTION

Among 16 to 24-year-old individuals in the United States, nearly 5.5% are classified as high school dropouts. These individuals have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential and are currently not enrolled in either high school or college (McFarland et al., 2019). Further, 9% of individuals who are 25 years of age and older do not have a high school diploma or General Education Diploma (GED) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Individuals without a high school or alternative credential have suboptimal labor market outcomes as the more education an individual accrues, the more likely they will be employed and have higher annual earnings (Ma et al., 2019). Even though the earnings premium for postsecondary education is most often highlighted, high school graduates earn on average \$10,000 more each year than high school dropouts. Specifically, among full-time workers 25 years of age and older, the median annual earnings of individuals with a high school diploma is \$40,500 compared to only \$30,800 for individuals with less than a high school diploma (Ma et al., 2019). Increasing the educational attainment of citizens without a high school diploma, thus moving them into higher income brackets, could have dramatic, positive economic impacts for such individuals, communities, and the country.

While it is well-known that community colleges serve as an access point for many non-traditional and underserved student populations (Clayton & Means, 2018; Mullin, 2012), one less-discussed population that community colleges serve are students without a high school diploma. With their open admissions policies and relatively low tuition, community colleges provide a vital postsecondary entry point for many Americans (Cohen et al., 2014), especially individuals without a high school diploma. In many states, community colleges offer adult basic education programming. These programs are funded by states and the federal government to provide instruction in reading, literacy, numeracy, and GED preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Recognizing that skills and education improve earnings and employment rates, an investment in Adult Basic Education programs is an effort to improve individual and societal outcomes (Kim & Belzer, 2021). Unfortunately, these types of programs in many community colleges are not always aligned with college-level coursework and are often unsuccessful in helping students advance to college-level coursework (Jenkins et al., 2008).

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of community colleges as a critical access point to higher education, specifically for individuals without a high school diploma. This article highlights how the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) is addressing both postsecondary access and workforce demands through the *Five for Six Scholarship* program. This unique scholarship provides individuals without a high school diploma with a path towards college and a credential that can lead to a high-wage, high-demand career. The article will highlight both the success and challenges of the scholarship program. In addition, the article provides recommendations to community college leaders and practitioners for implementing a similar Adult Basic Education initiative in other states.

THE LOUISIANA COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM

While community colleges have been in existence in the United States since the early twentieth century, Louisiana did not establish a statewide system of community colleges until the twenty-first century. In 1999, Louisiana Governor Murphy J. “Mike” Foster, Jr. led the Louisiana Legislature to establish the LCTCS ([Louisiana Constitution, Article VIII, Section 7.1](#)). Prior to the establishment of the LCTCS, a decentralized network of vocational schools controlled by local K-12 school boards offered vocational training, and 4-year universities throughout the state offered associate degrees. Today, the LCTCS is a centralized system of 12 public community colleges offering adult education, vocational training, and associate degrees. The 12 colleges have a combined enrollment of 52,604 college degree-seeking students, 17,651 non-credit/workforce students, and 14,870 adult education students (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2021). The colleges offer a wide array of programs such as Associate Degrees in Business, Computer Science, General Studies, Process Technology, and Instrumentation, as well as short-term non-credit workforce programs such as those in Phlebotomy and Welding. The adult education departments within the colleges offer HiSET testing preparation, as well as community education programming such as English as a Second Language (ESL), Financial Literacy, and Computer Literacy. The 12 colleges are governed by a single Board of Supervisors, function under one set of policies, have the same admissions application, and have a single student information system. This degree of coordination provides the LCTCS with an ability to scale on a state-wide level, affording a unique opportunity to address and ameliorate demographic disparities in educational attainment through access to postsecondary education.

THE ADULT LEARNER WITHOUT A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

Often forgotten within postsecondary access research and literature is the adult learner without a high school diploma. Nowhere is the access mission of community colleges more critical than within states where community colleges are charged with providing adult basic education to such individuals. Specifically, 13 states, including Louisiana, house their adult basic education programs in their community college system (Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, 2021). In 2010, the Louisiana Legislature transferred responsibility for adult basic education from the statewide K-12 Board to the LCTCS due to a lack of adult basic education services for adult learners. The transfer of adult education from the K-12 sector to the postsecondary sector in Louisiana warranted a switch from pedagogy to andragogy, and more focus upon contextualized learning and workforce training/preparation. Knowles (1980) compared the way adults learn (andragogy) with the way children learn (pedagogy), emphasizing that adults are capable of directing their own learning, can draw on life experiences to facilitate learning, learn best when applying new knowledge immediately to real-world situations, and are often more motivated to learn by internal factors instead of external factors. Further, Knowles (1984) suggested that adult educators: clearly explain and demonstrate why a concept or skill is important to learn; focus on tasks as opposed to simply memorization of facts; and engage learners in the solving of real-world problems.

In 2016, several years following the transfer of adult basic education to LCTCS, all LCTCS colleges removed the high school diploma as a requirement for admission, allowing adult education students, or any individual without a high school diploma, the opportunity to pursue a college education. The presence of adult basic education programs on community college campuses throughout Louisiana now allows for the seamless transition between adult basic education and postsecondary education. LCTCS colleges, therefore, have the unique ability to not only assist adult students with obtaining a high school equivalency credential but to also prepare them for the workforce.

From 2010 to 2016, LCTCS established adult basic education programs at community colleges and worked to transition adults without a high school diploma into college coursework and workforce training programs. However, more work was needed given the large number of Louisiana citizens without a high school diploma. In Louisiana, approximately 441,000 adults do not have a high school diploma, which is approximately 15% of the state's working-age population, and much higher than the national figure of 9% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). While every state has a population of adults without a high school diploma, states have historically sought to address their skills gap through a focus on K-12 education, and a traditional progression of high school equivalency (e.g., HiSET, GED completion) to college instruction.

Louisiana took a different path to serve its adult population without a high school diploma. As a result, in 2021, the average age of students enrolled in adult basic education was 31, and one in five community college students began in an adult basic education program in Louisiana. These data signals that a strong student pipeline between adult basic education and postsecondary enrollment has been developed. Adult education instructors work closely with college admissions staff to transition students between adult education classes and college classes. In some cases, the student begins in adult education classes, expresses interest in pursuing college classes before completing the HiSET exam (e.g., earning a high school equivalency), and is assisted by adult education and college admissions personnel with enrolling in college classes. In other cases, students begin college classes and are referred to adult education classes to receive additional support, such as reading comprehension and math tutoring. This type of collaboration between adult basic

education instructors and college admissions personnel is a result of the *Five for Six Scholarship* program.

The *Five for Six Scholarship*

The return of federal Ability-to-Benefit (ATB) provisions in 2015 provided an opportunity for Louisiana to provide college access to its population without a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). ATB provisions allow students without a high school credential to gain access to Title IV funding if they pass an approved ATB test or complete at least 6 credit hours of college-level coursework. Once they have proven their “ability to benefit” from postsecondary coursework, students can receive Title IV funding if they are enrolled in an eligible career pathway (concurrent enrollment in both adult education and a credit-bearing college program).

In summer 2016, LCTCS set a policy that required all 12 community colleges across Louisiana to allocate 5% of revenues generated from tuition increases in the academic year 2015–2016 to financially assist students enrolled in adult education programs with the cost of 6 credit hours of college-level coursework. This “set aside” generated approximately \$600,000 statewide. Thus, the *Five for Six Scholarship* was born—5% of college revenues to cover the cost of 6 credit hours. These funds represent a bridge to federal financial aid eligibility and the opportunity to obtain a postsecondary credential that leads to a high-wage, high-demand career.

With seed funding in place, LCTCS then turned to making revisions in admissions policies at all 12 LCTCS colleges. Ensuring that adult education students could simultaneously pursue a high school equivalency and postsecondary credential remained a challenge as many individual LCTCS colleges required a high school diploma for admission. In June 2016, the LCTCS Board of Supervisors removed the high school credential from the requirements for admission for all 12 LCTCS colleges. This change signaled a commitment to a truly open-access mission and allowed *Five for Six Scholarship* recipients to enroll in college-level coursework.

Implementation of the *Five for Six Scholarship* began in earnest in fall 2016, with adult basic education instructors serving as the identifier of potential *Five for Six Scholarship* recipients and college admissions staff working with the students to get them enrolled in suitable college courses. Eligibility requirements for the scholarship were not set by the LCTCS Board. Instead, individual colleges could experiment. Some colleges set minimum test score requirements (utilizing the Test of Adult Basic Education or Accuplacer test); others did not. LCTCS staff felt it beneficial to allow colleges the leeway to structure the program in ways that best served local needs. This variability in program implementation also provided LCTCS staff with robust data for quantitative analysis of best practices once the number of program participants reached a statistically significant threshold.

To promote the program, LCTCS undertook a \$200,000 statewide marketing campaign that included television commercials, radio advertisements, social media ads, and ads on public transit busses and bus stops. The theme of the campaign, *Yes U Can*, was purposefully designed to motivate and capture the attention of potential students. Ads featured students from a variety of backgrounds and age ranges, some posing with family and others on a college campus. Tags from the ads included *Yes U Can make a better life for your family*; *Yes U Can attend college*; *Yes U Can earn your high school diploma*; and *Yes U Can become work-ready*. A toll-free number and dedicated website were listed on the ads directly connecting students to enrollment specialists within a centralized unit at the LCTCS main office via phone or webchat. Student success stories were shared on social media,

garnering attention for local colleges. Paid ads were used to target the adult learner population. In addition, posters and postcards were shared throughout the state at job fairs.

Five for six success

In its first 4 years, the *Five for Six* program demonstrated overall positive results, as well as many individual success stories. This outcome is especially important given the program's diverse student population. Students of color account for 66% (387) of the student population, and over half (56%) are female. From fall 2016 through spring 2020, a total of 973 students received a *Five for Six Scholarship*. On average, *Five for Six Scholarship* recipients attended 2.1 semesters, and 37% (360) earned more than 6 credit hours (i.e., they earned more than the initial 6 credit hours funded by the scholarship). Close to 20% of the students have completed at least one credential, with or without earning the high school equivalency. Approximately 16% have earned a high school equivalency. Of those completing a college credential, the majority completed credentials in Welding and Nursing, which are both considered high-wage, high-demand occupations in Louisiana (Louisiana Workforce Commission, 2021). Once students were eligible for federal financial aid, 30% of the students received a Pell Grant award, which provided funding to continue taking college classes.

While such aggregate statistics are compelling, the real story of *Five for Six* is the personal narratives of individual students. For example, one of the participants was a 37-year-old African American male who dropped out of high school in 10th grade and was able to study Welding while simultaneously preparing to earn his high school equivalency. With the *Five for Six Scholarship*, a 32-year-old White mother who struggled with reading comprehension and dropped out of high school in 11th grade was able to take college coursework while working on her high school equivalency. Likewise, a 50-year-old Hispanic woman attended four semesters part-time to complete her Emergency Medical Responder credential while also earning her high school equivalency. These three stories highlight some of the ways that the *Five for Six Scholarship* has provided educational opportunities for adult learners across Louisiana.

Five for six challenges

Though there are reasons to celebrate the success of the *Five for Six* program, challenges remain. Long-term funding of the program is still uncertain, and the remedial needs of the scholarship recipients have proven to be pervasive and a barrier to their success in college-level courses. These challenges must be addressed before the program becomes a standard operating budget item. LCTCS is committed to finding innovative solutions to these issues.

Tuition increases in the academic year 2015–2016 created the seed funds of approximately \$600,000 to start the *Five for Six Scholarship* program. As of June 2020, approximately \$1 million has been spent. While LCTCS colleges remain committed to setting aside 5% of additional revenues that continue to accrue following tuition increases previously established, the colleges are committed to not increasing tuition in the future. If enrollment is stagnant or drops, the program's funding would drop as well. To address this, LCTCS continues to pursue new partnerships. An example is a promising new partnership between the LCTCS and the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The two agencies are partnering to utilize Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) funds to fund training for Louisiana's unemployed and

underemployed populations (Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, 2020). The two agencies plan to braid *Five for Six Scholarship* funds with SNAP E&T funds for those students who are eligible for SNAP E&T. SNAP E&T funds can be utilized to not only pay tuition but also to pay for other expenses such as transportation and dependent care.

The remedial needs of the *Five for Six Scholarship* recipients are an additional challenge. Seventy-three percent of adult basic education students in Louisiana are on a 6th–8th grade reading and math level. While many *Five for Six Scholarship* recipients are on a higher math and reading level, the students often need additional support to be successful in college-level coursework. Remedial coursework, additional tutoring, and skilled faculty are needed, but are not plentiful. LCTCS colleges responded to this need in several ways, including the establishment of co-requisite remedial courses and tutoring centers. However, the staffing needed to meet the needs of this population continues to be a challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPLICATION

To replicate what LCTCS has accomplished, five key factors should ideally be in place. These include authority for adult basic education, a single, shared student information system, a focus on workforce outcomes, a commitment to meeting adult learners where they are, and the will to change false perceptions. A description of these ideal conditions follows below.

Authority for adult basic education

Responsibility for adult basic education varies from state to state. In 25 states, the state's K-12 agency is responsible, in others, it is the state's workforce/labor agency. In only 13 states, including Louisiana, the authority for adult basic education is the responsibility of the community and technical college system. The community and technical college system is ideal because it provides the opportunity to build a more seamless (and in our case, simultaneous) transition between adult basic education and postsecondary education. LCTCS has been able to move the needle with the adult population without a high school diploma significantly because of its statutory authority over adult basic education in the state of Louisiana.

A single, shared student information system

All LCTCS colleges utilize a single instance of Ellucian's Banner Student Information System. A single student information system across all 12 colleges has provided the LCTCS with the ability to scale initiatives like the *Five for Six Scholarship* on a state-wide level. A single database has also provided an opportunity to assess outcomes statewide, providing rich data analysis capability for the uncovering of best practices.

A focus on workforce outcomes

LCTCS colleges consider themselves as workforce development entities. Graduate earnings are tracked through data-sharing agreements, business and industry input is routinely

sought at the local level for curriculum development, and programs are evaluated every 3 years, with employment outcomes comprising a significant portion of the review. Starting with the student's career in mind provides a framework for colleges to make decisions about program offerings and sends a strong signal to the student population that the college is a place to better their personal economic outlook.

Meeting adult learners where they are

Typically, colleges devote significant time and resources to recruiting high school students. A college representative visits the local high school or invites groups of high school students to tour the college. Recruiting adult students is much more challenging. Adults are busy, they are not located in a single location 40 hours per week, and messaging must convey the value in the proposition of going back to school. A shift in thinking about who to recruit and how to recruit is necessary. Creative and strategic marketing that was broad in nature (e.g., television, radio, social media) sending a “you can” message was paramount to recruiting adult learners without a high school diploma back into the education pipeline.

The will to challenge false perceptions

Finally, perhaps the most important factor that must be in place is the willingness to challenge the belief that individuals without a high school diploma are not capable of preparing for or doing college-level work. LCTCS committed itself to a truly open-access mission by eliminating the high school diploma as a requirement for admission to college. The *Five for Six* program and the completion of college-level courses by many of the *Five for Six Scholarship* recipients challenge the high school diploma as a requirement.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Louisiana is making significant progress in addressing the needs of adult learners without college credentials by focusing upon adult learners without a high school diploma. Below is a list of questions that may be useful to other states as they address Adult Basic Education needs.

1. How many working-age adults in your state or county do not have a high school diploma?
2. What are the needs of this population (financial, social, basic skills, employment)?
3. What state or local entities and initiatives are currently addressing the needs of this population? What gaps exist?
4. What kind of economic impact is possible if this segment of the population is brought back into the educational pipeline and credentialed with employer-recognized and employer-needed skills?
5. What financial resources would be needed to implement comprehensive outreach and programming for this segment of the working-age population? What financial resources currently exist, and what funding gaps exist?
6. Who are the stakeholders that could be brought together to address gaps in programming and resources (policymakers, business and industry, workforce agencies, K-12, postsecondary, non-profit organizations)? Of these, which entity is best positioned to take the lead?

CONCLUSION

Over the past 5 years, Louisiana has embarked upon a mission to engage with and bring back into the educational pipeline its adult population without a high school diploma. This journey has resulted in close to 1000 individuals being given an opportunity to earn both a high school equivalency and a college credential simultaneously, and to have that education funded. It has taken the formation of a community college system, statutory change in responsibility for adult education, a commitment to a truly open-access mission, and the will to invest in a population that previously has been overlooked. Challenges remain, including the need for stable funding and addressing the remedial needs of adult learners without a high school diploma. Nevertheless, Louisiana remains committed to ensuring that every Louisiana citizen, including those without a high school diploma, has access to postsecondary education.

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