



**Inside  
Higher  
Ed**

# Modernizing Postsecondary Policy to Better Support Adult Learners

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# Presenter



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# The State of Adult Learners

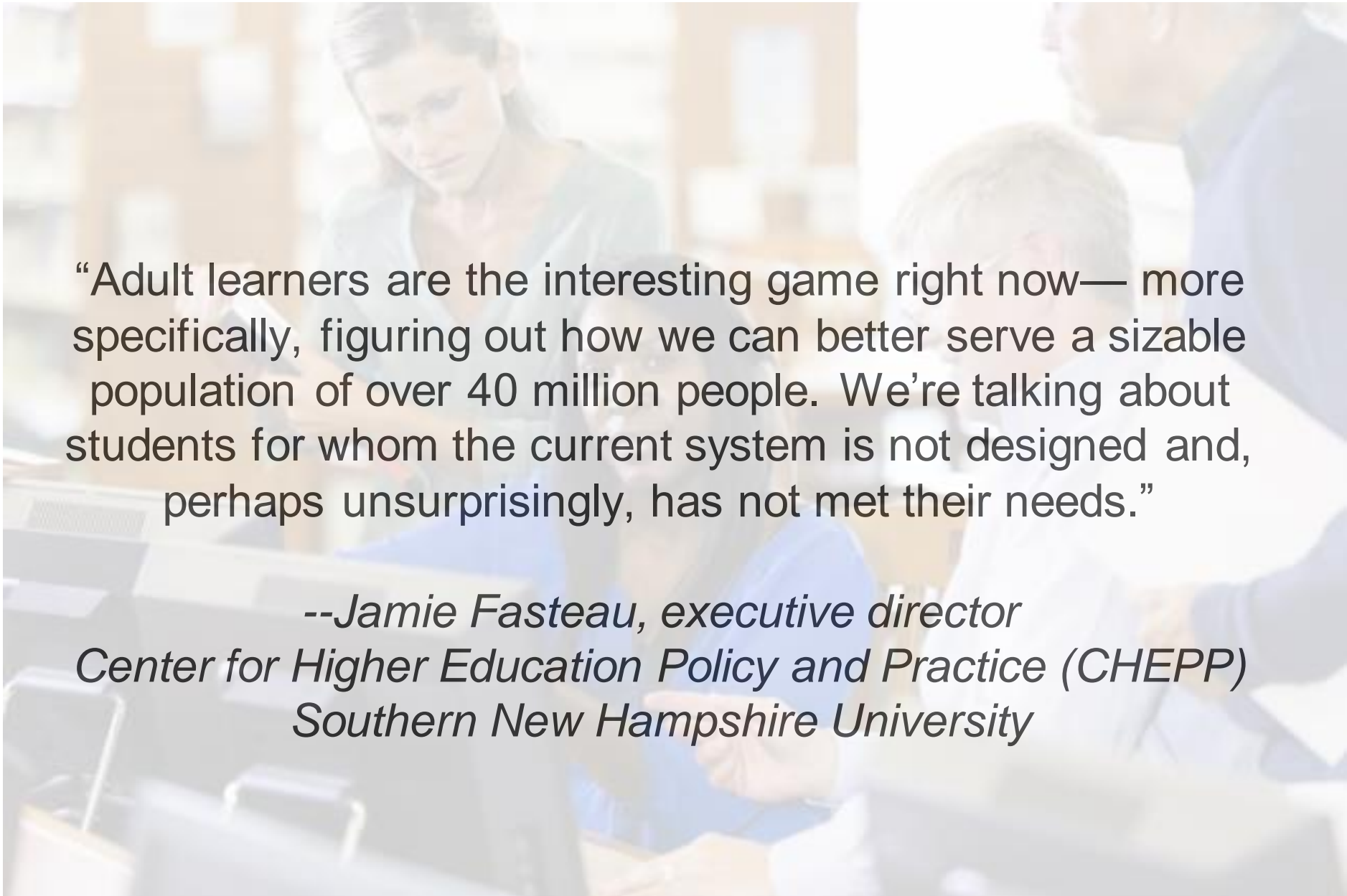
- Defining characteristics of this population: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, current part-time enrollment, financial independence of parents/caregivers, absence of a standard high school diploma, current full-time work, responsible for dependents other than a spouse, single parent (*National Center for Education Statistics*).
- They make up a significant proportion of current postsecondary learners, but also tens of millions of prospective learners who might enroll but are deterred (or were formerly enrolled).
- Why educating them matters: important for the success of the learners themselves, the economy, and for institutions, given demographic trends ahead.



# The State of Federal Policy

- Higher education policy, like higher education itself, has historically focused on 18-22-year-old learners.
- But while the learners themselves have changed, policy has lagged:
  - No Higher Education Act for 15 years.
  - Increasingly difficult to get bipartisan consensus and movement on many policy issues in our divided political environment now.
  - Many policy makers (and journalists!) and many people in higher education who may shape government policy still cling to traditional perceptions of who the students are and what their institutions should be.





“Adult learners are the interesting game right now— more specifically, figuring out how we can better serve a sizable population of over 40 million people. We’re talking about students for whom the current system is not designed and, perhaps unsurprisingly, has not met their needs.”

*--Jamie Fasteau, executive director  
Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice (CHEPP)  
Southern New Hampshire University*

# Areas of Opportunity

- Credit-transfer pathways
- Credit for prior learning
- More-flexible funding options
  - Satisfactory academic progress criteria
  - Employer-funded tax benefits
- Labor market alignment
- Primary needs coverage



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# Credit Transfer: The Barriers

- Roughly 40% of undergraduates start at a community college
  - ~8 in 10 expect to transfer to a four-year college
  - ~2.5 in 10 actually do
- More than a third of all students enroll at more than one institution before earning a degree.
- The average transfer student loses more than 40% of academic credits when transferring.
- Students who transfer with fewer credits are less likely to complete degrees. ([Sova](#))



*Tahsi-Delek/E+/Getty Images*

# Credit Transfer: What Can Be Done?

Transfer-of-credit decisions are made at institutional/department level, and governments (esp. the feds) loath to interfere.

- Most focus at federal level has been on transparency – making sure institutions don't have discriminatory policies and make clear what their policies are.

States have more policy levers:

- Requiring acceptance of gen ed courses from other state publics, credits from in-state community colleges
- Establishing clearer pathways, common course numbering
- Tying funding to transfer rates



# More-Flexible Funding Options: Satisfactory Academic Progress Criteria

Requirements for receiving Title IV aid have a time limit (150% of published length of an academic program, e.g., 6 years for a four-year degree). Adult learners who stop out, as many do, often run up against that limit. There is also a GPA floor.



- Proposed solution ([Higher Learning Advocates](#)): “After a period of non-enrollment, students who have lost access to federal financial aid should have their Pell eligibility reinstated. This way, adults can re-enter the higher education system and have another chance at a degree or credential.”

# More-Flexible Funding Options: Employer-Funded Tax Benefits

Section 127 of the U.S. tax code allows up to \$5,250 of tax-free employer education/training benefits. That figure was based on average cost of a degree ... in 1978.

Proposed solutions ([Stand Together Trust](#)):

- Increase the limit
- Create individual accounts (like 529 plans) that could incorporate other sources of funds, make the money portable, etc.

# Labor Market Alignment

Adult learners, even more than traditional-age students, tend to view post-high-school education and training through a job/career prism.

So various federal and state efforts, current and prospective, understanding of career paths and link education to work especially matter for this cohort.

They include:

- Better data (College Transparency Act)
- Use of Pell Grants for very short-term programs (“short-term Pell”)
- Funding of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act
- [Supporting apprenticeships](#)



*FG Trade/E+/Getty Images*

# Primary Needs Coverage

“Sometimes it’s that \$300 to replace a tire that could really help a student stay in school. Prior to the pandemic, that wasn’t even a solution that needed to be part of the system.”

*--Julie Peller, Higher Education Advocates*

- **Emergency grants:** [Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students](#) program
- **Food insecurity:** Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program has work and other requirements that can disqualify many students. Federal Farm Bill could address.
- **Child care:** Small grant program exists, but doesn’t touch the need. (One in five college students are also parents.)

# Credit for Prior Learning

**What is it?** Recognition of college-level learning gained in personal and professional pursuits (a.k.a. “prior learning assessment”).

**How does it help learners?** Shortens time to degree, saving time as well as money.

**How can it be recognized?** Standardized/challenge exams, portfolio assessment, credit for military/corporate training.

**What impedes its wide-scale adoption?** Fees learners pay; institutions’ fear of losing revenue by recognizing credit earned elsewhere.

# Credit for Prior Learning: Possible Policy Changes

**Federal:** letting low-income students use financial aid funds to pay for prior learning assessment.

**State:** Policies should embrace framework laid out by Council for Adult and Experiential Learning that identify standards, make institutional policies transparent, accessible and available to learners, and implement quality controls. ([Higher Learning Advocates](#))

# Thanks

