



New England Fast Facts

Completion Colleges: A Primer for Policymakers

What are completion colleges and who do completion colleges serve?

Completion colleges are higher education institutions designed to serve adults whose degree attainment has been delayed by family, work, military or other interruptions. In “aggregating” learning from various sources to build a degree, completion colleges transfer credits earned at other colleges and assess prior learning such as training programs, military experience, or industry certification or licensure to award college credit (a process known as prior learning assessment, or PLA). Once enrolled, students can fulfill most remaining degree credits online. Most completion colleges are public, though a number of private nonprofit colleges also have “completion college” missions.

Researchers Nate Johnson and Alli Bell found that completion colleges are typically¹:

- Primarily focused on bachelor’s degrees,
- Separately, regionally accredited,
- Heavily reliant on online instruction,
- Using prior-learning assessment extensively,
- Serving a high proportion (over 75%) of part-time, returning learners among incoming students, and
- Serving a high proportion (more than half) of students age 25 and older.

Figure 1: Completion Colleges by State

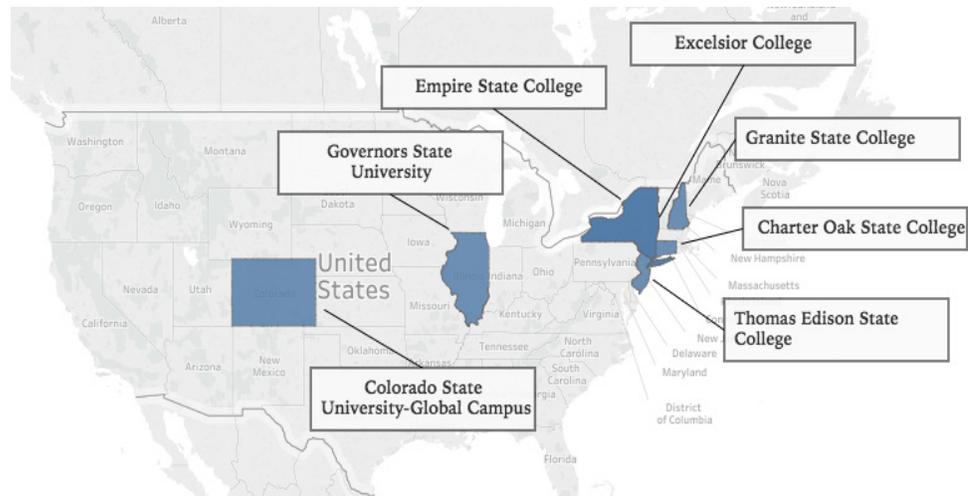


Figure 2: Enrollment and Degrees Awarded, 2014-15

	Undergraduates Enrolled	Undergraduates Age 25+	Degrees Awarded
Granite State College (NH)	1,869	73%	649
Empire State College (NY)	10,873	85%	3,682
Excelsior College (NY)	38,426	92%	4,903
Charter Oak State College (CT)	1,929	91%	602
Thomas Edison State College (NJ)	20,143	89%	3,324
Governors State University (IL)	3,585	58%	1,511
Colorado State University-Global Campus	6,907	87%	1,832
Total	83,732	-	16,503

Notes: Enrollment is undergraduate headcount (not FTE) in fall 2014. Degrees awarded counts all undergraduate certificates and degrees awarded in academic year 2014-15.

Source: NEBHE analysis of U.S. Department of Education data

¹ Nate Johnson and Alli Bell. Scaling Completion College Services as a Model for Increasing Adult Degree Completion. 2015.

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What might a completion college experience look like?

“Over the years, I had accumulated a wealth of experience as a fine art photographer and a vast portfolio to show for it, but this was irrelevant without a college degree... Charter Oak’s Prior Learning Assessment Program offers the ideal solution to my dilemma. With the help of my advisor, I have been able to pull together credits from my first college foray and fulfill the remaining liberal arts credits needed by taking online classes offered at Charter Oak. Most importantly, I have been turning specific photography projects and experiences into credits through the PLA’s portfolio assessment program... I find an appropriate class at any college or university and package an existing project in such a way as to demonstrate how I have fulfilled the requirements of that course... Work I have put a great deal of time and effort into and then set aside is now being turned into college credits at a fraction of the cost of enrolling in a traditional institution and starting from scratch.”

- Andrew, Charter Oak State College (CT) (edited for length)

What might completing a degree at a completion college cost?

Figure 3: Tuition & Fees, 2014-2015

	Transfer in 60 Credits + Complete Degree		Transfer in 60 Credits + Earn 30 Credits through PLA + 30 Credits through Coursework		Range of Cost per Degree: Maximum - Minimum Credits Transferred in	
	In-state	Out-of-state	In-state	Out-of-state	In-state	Out-of-state
Granite State College (NH)	\$17,600	\$19,400	\$9,200	\$10,100	\$8,900 - \$35,200	\$9,800 - \$38,800
Empire State College (NY)	\$13,500	\$18,700	\$8,500	\$11,100	\$6,900 - \$26,600	\$9,500 - \$37,100
Excelsior College (NY)	\$28,500	\$28,500	\$16,200	\$16,200	\$3,500 - \$56,400	\$3,500 - \$56,400
Charter Oak State College (CT)	\$17,000	\$18,100	\$9,700	\$12,200	\$1,900 - \$31,300	\$2,100 - \$41,000
Thomas Edison State College (NJ)	\$12,500	\$18,000	\$6,400	\$9,200	\$1,800 - \$24,600	\$3,300 - \$35,700
Governors State University (IL)	\$18,800	\$34,100	\$9,400	\$17,000	\$7,900 - \$37,500	\$14,000 - \$68,100
Colorado State University-Global Campus	\$10,500	\$10,500	\$10,900	\$10,900	\$10,500 - \$37,800	\$10,500 - \$37,800
University of Phoenix (Business Degree)	\$18,800		-		\$18,800 - \$59,600	

Notes: 2014-15 tuition and fee levels held constant. Coursework scenarios assume full-time attendance. Figures have been rounded. Source: Nate Johnson and Allie Bell. Scaling Completion College Services as a Model for Increasing Adult Degree Completion. 2015.

What questions should legislators or policymakers ask?

State legislators and policymakers who want to ensure students’ access to completion colleges can begin by asking questions such as:

- How many adults have some college credits or prior learning but no degree in my state?
- Do programs and policies to increase adult degree attainment in my state support adults to enroll in completion colleges?
- What are the workforce needs of my state? How does that align with the prior learning of adults with no degree in my state and the type of programs completion colleges offer?

If there is a public completion college in-state . . .

- What is my state’s funding approach to public colleges (base-plus, enrollment-driven, outcomes-based)? How might that support completion colleges’ revenue model (i.e., completion colleges face tension as they seek to award as much prior learning credit as possible while relying on students’ enrollment in their courses for revenue)?
- Are students that enroll at completion colleges eligible for state financial aid? Are the credits they earn through prior learning assessment eligible for state financial aid?

If there is not a public completion college in-state . . .

- Is it possible, politically and financially, to partner with an out-of-state completion college to make it more accessible to adults in my state?
- What can public institutions in my state learn and borrow from completion colleges’ mission and business model to better serve adults?

For questions or comments, please contact Gretchen Syverud at gsyverud@nebhe.org or 617-533-9522.

About the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)

Established in 1955 by six visionary New England governors, NEBHE is a regional compact that works across New England to: help leaders assess, develop and implement education practices and policies of regional significance; promote regional cooperation that encourages efficient sharing of education resources; and strengthen the relationship between higher education and the regional economy. Learn more at www.nebhe.org.



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