REACHING CALIFORNIA'S COLLEGE ATTAINMENT GOALS

# A Closer Look at Adult Learners in California Community Colleges

Advancing educational attainment is critical to realizing the racial, social, and economic equity that Californians envision for future generations. College Futures Foundation is at the forefront of this effort, working toward an ambitious goal—aligned to the statewide target—of achieving 70% postsecondary attainment among underserved learners age 25 and older. Reaching this target requires deliberate efforts to expand access to critical information, ensure timely and effective support, and improve the overall college experience to drive persistence and completion.

Meeting the unique needs of older adult learners, in particular, is crucial to raising educational attainment across California. Currently, just 56% of adults ages 25 to 64 hold a college degree or high-value credential.[1,2] Among those who begin their postsecondary journey at a California community college at age 25 or older, fewer than one in four complete an associate degree, earn a credential, or transfer to a four-year institution within four years. Fostering the continued—or renewed—engagement of adult learners, and enabling them to earn degrees or high-value credentials, must be part of any path to long-term, widespread economic mobility.

**Goal: By 2035, at least 70% of California learners who are underserved will attain a postsecondary degree or credential that increases opportunity for economic mobility.**

**Adult learners are central to this aim.**

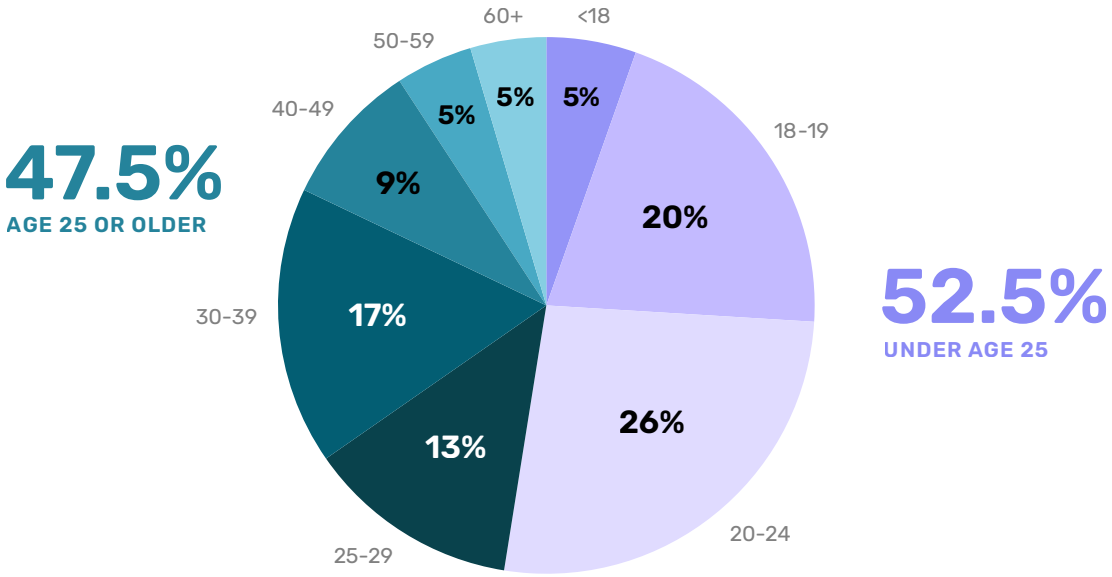


In California, the majority of adults age 25 or older who pursue a college degree or credential do so through California Community Colleges (CCC). Gaining a deeper understanding of these adult learners—their characteristics, patterns of enrollment, and educational outcomes—is essential to supporting their success. This brief, the first in a series, provides an overview of CCC students age 25 or older. Subsequent briefs will examine attainment outcomes across distinct subgroups within the adult learner population.

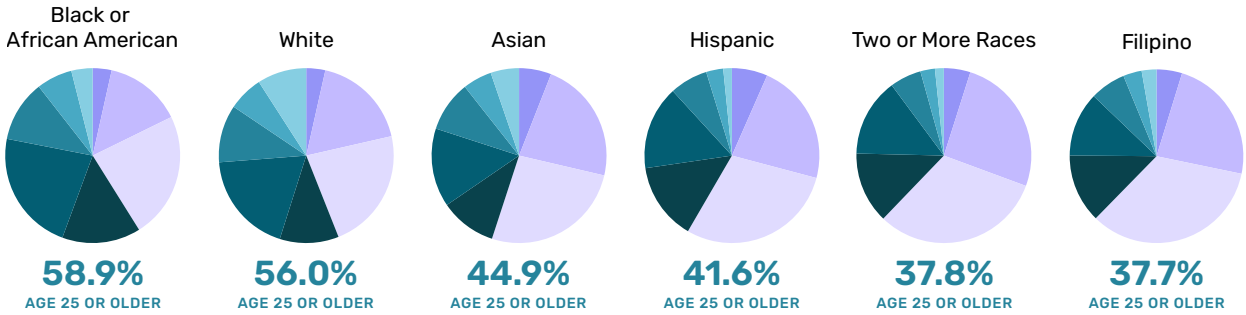
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**Nearly half of California's community college students are age 25 or older.** The California community college system is the nation's largest and most diverse system of higher education, with over two million students enrolled across 116 colleges. In 2023–24, 47.5% of those students were age 25 or older.



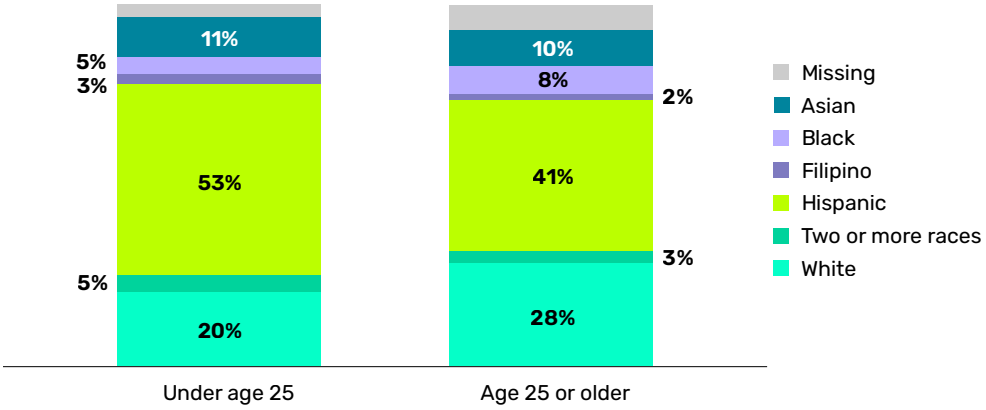

**Among Black students and white students, there are more students age 25 or older than those who are younger.** In fact, nearly 60% of Black students at community colleges are in this older age group. In contrast, Filipino and multiracial students are much more likely to be younger, with over 60% of students in each of these two subgroups under the age of 25.




**Source:** Authors' calculations from Management Information Systems (MIS) data available through a data-sharing agreement between the California Education Lab and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**Figure note:** This figure includes 2,129,024 student enrollments in 2023–24 academic year (inclusive of summer, fall, winter, and spring terms). Each student is counted once if they are enrolled in any given term during the academic year; student counts may be duplicative in cases where students are enrolled in more than one campus in the same year. Student age is included in the MIS data for each term; for this research we use the youngest age reported during the 2023–24 academic year. We use race labels that align with the CCCCO's reporting of racial subgroups on DataVista.

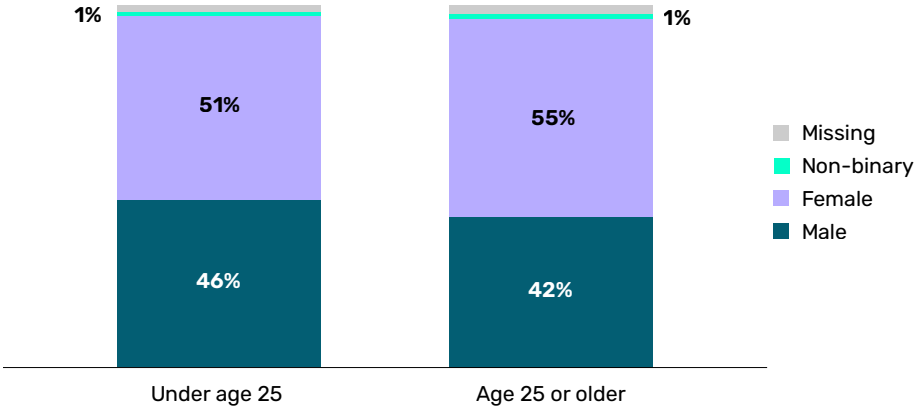
**Adult learners age 25 or older are less likely to be Hispanic and more likely to be white or Black than students under the age of 25.** There are notable differences in racial/ethnic composition when comparing students age 25 and older to their younger counterparts. Hispanic students comprise the majority of community college students, irrespective of age. However, there are *proportionately fewer* Hispanic students among adult learners, representing just 41% of students age 25 or older, compared to younger students among whom 53% are Hispanic. Meanwhile, there are *proportionately more* white and Black students among adult learners age 25 or older, compared to their younger counterparts.




**Source:** Authors' calculations from MIS data available through a data-sharing agreement between the California Education Lab and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**Figure note:** This figure includes 2,129,024 student enrollments in 2023–24 academic year (inclusive of summer, fall, winter, spring terms). Omitted racial groups include Native American/Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, each of which accounts for less than 0.5% of the under 25 and 25 or older populations. Race identification is missing for 3% of students under the age of 25 and 7% of students age 25 or older.

**Adult learners are more likely to be female than male when compared to students under age 25.** Although female students are overrepresented among all community college attendees, there is a larger gender imbalance among older adult students than younger students.




**Source:** Authors' calculations from MIS data available through a data-sharing agreement between the California Education Lab and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**Figure note:** This figure includes 2,129,024 student enrollments in 2023–24 academic year (inclusive of summer, fall, winter, and spring terms). Gender identification is missing for 2% of students.

**The majority of adult learners are not newly enrolled in college at age 25 or older, but were initially enrolled in postsecondary education earlier.** In fact, adult learners age 25 or older enroll in California Community Colleges with varying levels of prior experience in postsecondary education. Over a third enrolled more than a decade ago, while some are pursuing a degree or credential for the first time. Some are returning after a break from college to complete degrees or credentials they previously began. Others already hold a degree or certificate and are returning to upskill or retrain in another field.

Among adults age 25 or older enrolled in CCC in 2023–24:

| 39% | 30% | 14% | 4% |
|---|---|---|---|
| initially enrolled 10 or more years ago | initially enrolled in the last decade | were in their first year | held a prior degree |

**Source:** Authors' calculations from MIS data available through a data-sharing agreement between the California Education Lab and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**Figure note:** This figure includes 969,353 unique students age 25 or older enrolled during the 2023–24 academic year. The year of initial enrollment is unknown for 16% of students age 25 or older.

**Adult learners have a variety of other distinguishing characteristics.** About one-quarter of students age 25 or older received some type of financial aid in 2023–24, nearly half the rate of students under 25 years of age (50%). Additionally, 16% of adult learners are parenting while in school, compared to just 2% of those under the age of 25. About 4% of students age 25 or older have served in the military, nearly twice as many as younger students. Another 2% of adult learners were formerly involved with the foster care system and 1% have been homeless, mirroring rates among students under 25 years of age.

Among adults age 25 or older enrolled in CCC in 2023–24:

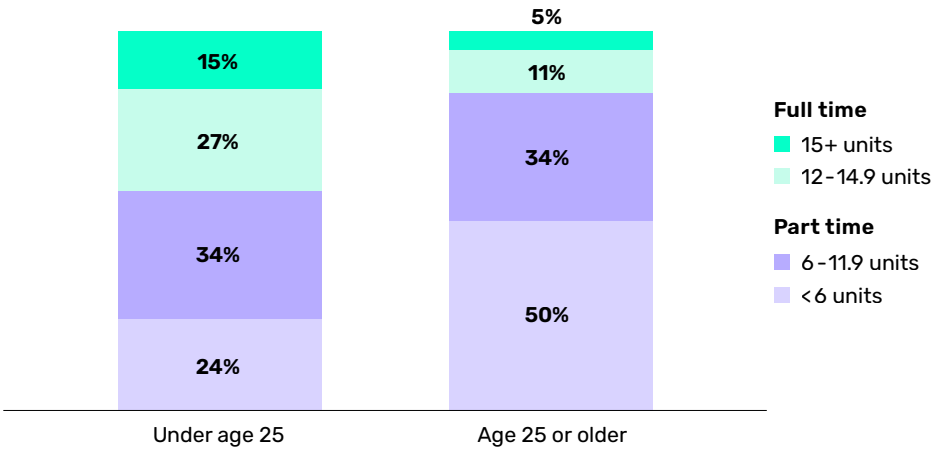
| 24% | 16% | 4% | 2% | 1% |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Financial aid recipient | Student parents | Military | Former foster | Homeless |

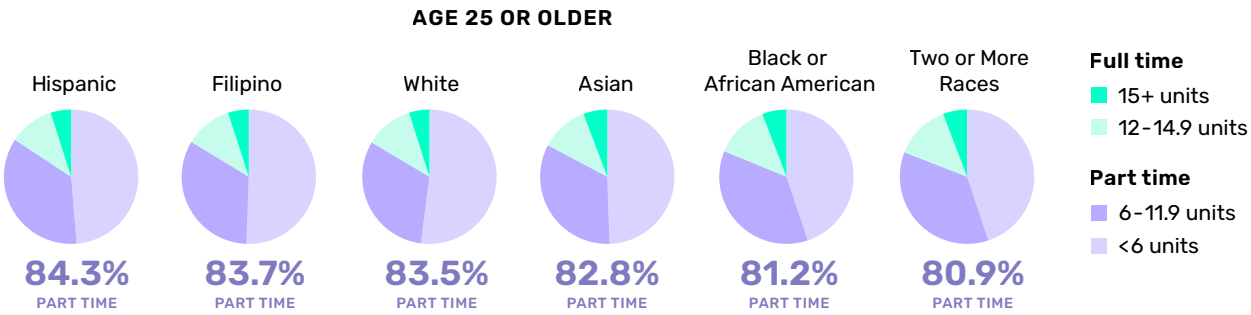
**Source:** Authors' calculations from MIS data available through a data-sharing agreement between the California Education Lab and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**Figure notes**: We use the receipt of financial aid as an indicator of economic need. Financial aid recipients are defined as students receiving any type of financial aid at any point while enrolled in CCC. This includes students who applied for and received financial assistance through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the California Dream Act Application (CADAA), or the California College Promise Grant (CCPG) Fee Waiver. There is no data by which to measure financial need or "eligibility" for financial aid for students who did not complete one of these applications. As a result, this indicator likely undercounts the number of students who may face financial constraints while enrolled in CCC.

Student parents are identified based on financial aid recipients who had minor dependent children at any point in their CCC enrollment. This is therefore an undercount as there are likely student parents, irrespective of age, who did not apply for financial aid. Military includes students on active duty, serving in the National Guard or military reserve status, and veterans. Former foster includes students who have ever been in a court-ordered out-of-home placement (foster home, group home, or court-ordered placement with a relative) at any point in their childhood. Homeless students are identified as defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act beginning in summer 2018.

**Adult learners tend to enroll in college part time.** Given the demands of additional obligations, it is perhaps not surprising that adult learners typically enroll in fewer total units per term than students younger than age 25. A large majority of adult learners (84%) enrolled part time (fewer than 12 units) in fall 2023, whereas only 58% of younger students enrolled part time in the same term. Importantly, the proportion of students age 25 or older who enroll full time differs across racial subgroups. Black and multiracial students are slightly more likely than their peers from other racial subgroups to enroll full time.



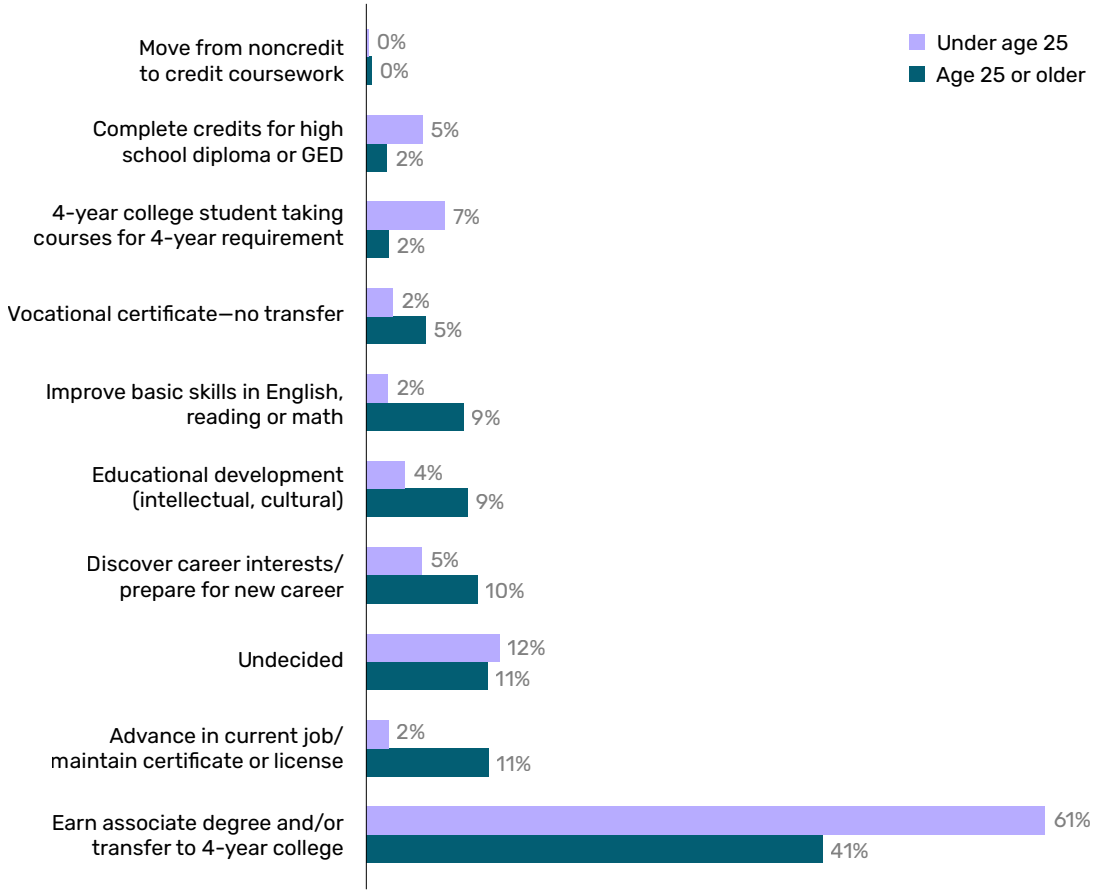




**Source:** Authors' calculations from MIS data available through a data-sharing agreement between the California Education Lab and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**Figure note**: This figure includes 736,601 students below the age of 25 and 475,497 students age 25 or older who attempted units during fall 2023.

**Adult learners who enroll in California Community Colleges report a variety of goals, reflecting the multi-faceted mission of the CCCs.**

- 41% intend to earn an associate degree and/or transfer to a four-year college
- 11% are taking classes to maintain current licensure or job advancement
- 9% are looking to improve basic skills or complete a GED or high school diploma
- 9% are seeking intellectual or cultural enrichment
- 5% plan to earn a vocational degree or certificate
- 2% are enrolled in four-year college and taking courses for bachelor's degree requirements




**Source:** Authors' calculations from MIS data available through a data-sharing agreement between the California Education Lab and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

**Figure note**: This figure includes 2,129,024 unique student enrollments in 2023–24 academic year (inclusive of summer, fall, winter, and spring terms).

# Conclusion

Understanding the diverse population of adult learners enrolled in California Community Colleges is the first step to improving the state's educational attainment rate and increasing economic mobility.

Adult learners face many competing demands on their time and energy, making it difficult to enroll full time and meet their goals and aspirations efficiently. In addition to the challenge of balancing work, family, and part-time study, many adult learners face significant barriers in accessing essential college resources—such as tutoring, academic advising, and office hours—when these services are not designed with their schedules and responsibilities in mind.

In subsequent briefs we will explore the enrollment trajectories of adult learners—those who started college after the age of 25 and those who started college early, paused, and returned as adult learners. We will investigate the diverse pathways through which adult learners meet their educational goals in CCC, including high-value certificates, non-credit programs, and credit-for-prior-learning. We will also interrogate a variety of factors that may impact the outcomes of adult learners in California Community Colleges, including program flexibility and access to support resources. Together, these briefs will provide a more comprehensive picture of this important demographic of California learners and set the context from which to advance policies and practices that hold promise for improving equity in educational attainment.

# Endnotes

1 Lumina Foundation (2023). A Stronger Nation Educational Attainment Dashboard.

2 A high value certificate is one that affords benefits in terms of income, job security, and professional growth. See for example: https://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/credentials-of-value?_gl=1*199iy24*_gcl_au*ODUxODg1ODAuMTc1NTEwOTE0Nw.

This report was prepared by Michal Kurlaender, Sherrie Reed, and Elizabeth Friedmann, researchers with the California Education Lab.

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## About The California Education Lab

The California Education Lab—in the School of Education at University of California, Davis—is a collaborative group of researchers investigating important questions of education policy and practice in California. Much of our work focuses on understanding how young adults are prepared for, transition into, and succeed in college. Our projects explicitly aim to understand and improve persistent inequalities in educational attainment for students from different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In our work, we partner with California educators and policymakers across the K–12 and postsecondary sectors to answer timely and relevant questions with rigorous analytical methods. Our long-standing relationships with the California Department of Education, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, and the California Student Aid Commission inform and enable our research. Over time, we have accumulated considerable knowledge about the State's multiple, and diverse, education sectors, and the data and methods necessary to answer critical policy questions for California.

Our work is supported through federal research grants and the generosity of private foundations.

**Education.UCDavis.edu/California-Education-Lab**

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## About College Futures Foundation

At College Futures Foundation, we believe in the power of postsecondary opportunity. We believe that securing the postsecondary success of learners facing the most formidable barriers will ensure that all of us can thrive—our communities, our economy, and our state. We believe that the equitable education system of the future, one that enables every learner to achieve their dreams and participate in an inclusive and robust economy, will be realized if we are focused, determined, and active in our leadership and partnership.

We also know that the past few years have brought profound shifts in California's education and workforce landscapes—including college enrollment declines alongside high demand for affordable, career-connected training, national conversations on student debt and mental health, and numerous other changes prompted or accelerated by COVID-19 and a nationwide racial reckoning. These changes have underscored the realities of how inequitably our systems center and serve diverse people. We know that the coming years will present equally significant challenges and opportunities, and that we must be well-prepared to meet these moments.

**Our Vision:** We envision a California where postsecondary education advances racial, social, and economic equity, unlocking upward mobility now and for generations to come.

**Our Mission:** Our mission is to increase postsecondary completion for learners who are underserved. We center learners and their aspirations and needs on the path to achieving their educational goals.

**CollegeFutures.org**

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