

# From Setback to Success:

## Meeting Comebacker Students Where They Are

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FEBRUARY 2024



HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A STRONG ECONOMY

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# Mission

We aim to transform California's higher education system into an engine of economic opportunity that empowers all Californians, particularly those from underserved communities, to achieve their full potential.

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# Vision

We envision a California where our state and regional economies and communities thrive, fueled by equitable and racially just postsecondary and workforce outcomes.

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# Philosophy

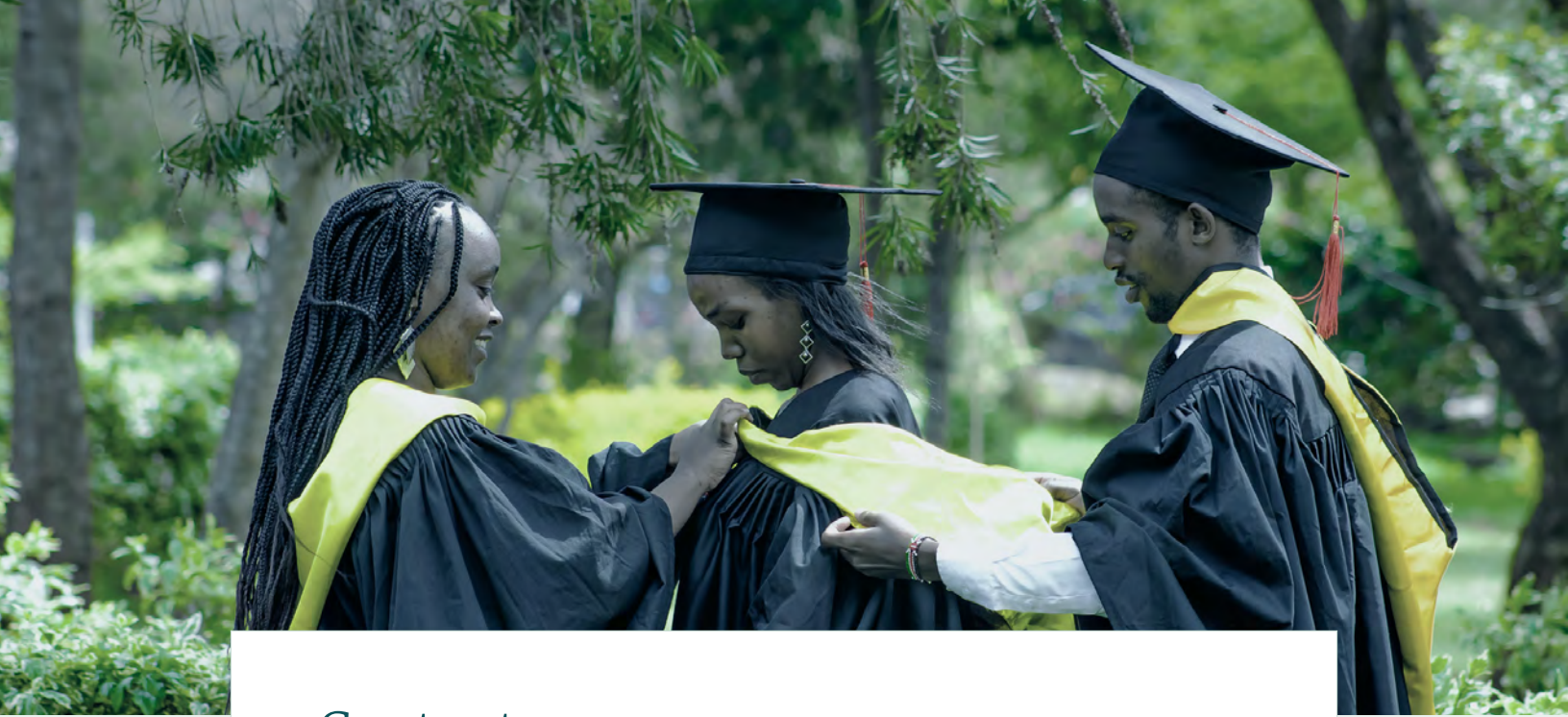
We view higher education as a vaccine and an antidote against economic stagnation and social stratification—for individual Californians, our communities, and the state's economy. We believe long-term economic growth for California will be accomplished through shared prosperity.

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# Summary

Over 6 million Californians ages 25 to 64 have completed some college but have not yet earned a credential.<sup>1</sup> Shifting the postsecondary structures and systems to support this prospective student population can serve as a critical component to addressing California’s workforce shortage.<sup>2</sup> Yet the needs of those with some college, no credential (SCNC), who disproportionately are members of underinvested-in populations, remain understudied in the postsecondary landscape<sup>3</sup>—leaving institutions and policymakers with limited evidence-based solutions to improve educational outcomes. Our study involved more than 50 interviews with “comebacker” students—SCNC individuals who later returned to college and graduated—to uncover strategies to help institutions better support these students and foster increased reenrollment and degree attainment across the state.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS



### Adapt to Meet the Needs of Today’s Students

- ✔ **Increase flexible learning modalities and structures.** Due to family and employment obligations, many adult learners are unable to attend classes in person or during the traditional workday and require additional flexibility in modality and scheduling. Comebackers in our study said they needed more options for fully online courses and programs, as well as programs with shortened terms (e.g., two 8-week sessions rather than one 16-week semester). These options would provide more entry and exit points and the ability to take fewer classes at one time while maintaining progress toward completion.



### Conduct Strategic Outreach

- ✔ **Reach out to students who stop out.** Many students who stopped out (exited college) were subsequently never contacted by their institution. Comebackers expressed a desire for personalized outreach from the college to determine why the student stopped out, explain the steps to reenrollment, and steer them toward helpful resources.
- ✔ **Use inclusive marketing materials and language.** Comebackers emphasized the importance of seeing students like themselves reflected in college marketing materials, and encountering language that is inclusive of a diversity of students and pathways to completion. Colleges could consistently promote a diverse visual representation of students, revise all written materials to use inclusive language, and provide inclusivity training for faculty and staff.
- ✔ **Reframe academic probation and provide support.** Many students exited college because they interpreted an academic probation notification as a signal that they could not succeed in

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college, rather than a sign to seek assistance. Colleges could reframe this student status to make it less punitive—instead, using the academic challenge as an opportunity to contact the student and provide support.



## Remove Reenrollment Barriers

- ✔ **Reinstate students' priority registration status upon their return.** For many comebackers, losing a priority registration status upon returning after a stop-out created challenges and kept them from staying on track to completion. Colleges could consider reinstating returning students' priority registration status.
- ✔ **Review catalog rights policies.**<sup>4</sup> After an extended stop-out, some students discovered they had lost their catalog rights, causing them to have to take additional courses and delaying their progress. To ease students' path to completion, colleges could examine their catalog rights policy and consider how it affects comebackers.
- ✔ **Offer credit for prior learning (CPL).** Comebackers often have significant knowledge and professional and life experiences for which they can be awarded college credit via CPL. To help propel students to completion, colleges can start by examining their current policies on CPL and investigating if and how they might expand the program.
- ✔ **Help students overcome failed grades.** Many comebackers had one or more failing grades on their transcripts, and this hindered their academic progress and endangered their financial aid. Colleges could review academic policies related to grades, consider practices such as grade forgiveness or academic renewal,<sup>5</sup> and advise students on ways to raise their GPAs and address failing grades on their transcripts.
- ✔ **Waive application and reenrollment requirements and fees.** Some comebackers experienced significant hurdles in the process of trying to return to college, including having to fully reapply, submit transcripts, pay fees, and find ways to pay full tuition because they were no longer eligible for financial aid. Waiving certain application requirements and fees for returning students could go a long way in getting them to reenroll.
- ✔ **Forgive institutional debt.** Some comebackers noted that their outstanding fees (e.g., library or parking fines) or more substantial institutional debt kept them from reenrolling sooner. Forgiving institutional debt can be a valuable tool for encouraging and actually getting students to return.<sup>6</sup>
- ✔ **Offer payment plans and other forms of financial assistance.** Many comebackers lost their financial aid at some point (often due to lack of satisfactory academic progress) and

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had to pay for one or more terms in full. To ease students' return when they lose access to financial aid, colleges could offer clearly defined payment plans and other forms of financial assistance, such as book vouchers or course fee waivers.

- ✔ **Develop a comebacker-specific orientation.** Some comebackers expressed anxiety about returning to college after an extended stop-out, especially regarding the use of technology. To address comebackers' specific concerns and needs, colleges could develop a tailored orientation program to help these students reacclimate to college by providing information on available resources and communities, updates to relevant policies, and training for online tools.



## Provide Ongoing Support

- ✔ **Provide adult-focused advising.** Comebackers often manage multiple commitments in addition to school and may require more specialized advising due to issues related to having multiple enrollments, changes in policies, and other challenges. To help comebackers, colleges could provide students with a dedicated advisor, offer additional training on comebackers' needs for all staff, intentionally recruit a comebacker as an advisor, and build a model of advising that allows for continuity throughout a student's enrollment (even after stopping out).
- ✔ **Leverage online resources.** Most comebackers have limited time to engage in in-person structured activities and require more flexible access to resources. To address this, colleges could leverage online tools to provide information and support to students conveniently and cost effectively.
- ✔ **Facilitate a community of support.** Some comebackers expressed interest in connecting with students who are close to their age or stage in life as a way to build community. Colleges could promote peer support for comebackers by establishing both physical and online community spaces.
- ✔ **Take the uncertainty out of academic planning and progress.** Many comebackers were interested in moving through their programs in the most efficient way and would have appreciated a set educational plan and tools to track their progress. Colleges could build on existing initiatives to provide structured plans, auto-enroll students in classes, and set up a course management system that is easily accessible and makes clear what courses students need to complete.



# Colleges Have a Critical Opportunity to Better Serve Students with Some College, No Credential

**M**ore than 6 million Californian adults ages 25 to 64 have completed some college education but have not yet attained their education goals—and they are a necessary part of the solution to California’s workforce shortage and widening equity gap.<sup>7</sup> Yet the needs of adult learners with some college, no credential (SCNC), who disproportionately are members of underinvested-in populations, are understudied in the postsecondary landscape.<sup>8</sup> This leaves institutions and policymakers with few evidence-based solutions to improve these Californians’ success.

Many Californians have some college, no credential due to all-too-common setbacks.<sup>9</sup> Some hit an institutional barrier, such as loss of financial aid or the inflexibility of class scheduling; some experience personal obstacles, such as a health crisis or caretaking responsibilities; and many struggle to balance the competing responsibilities of school, work, and family. While institutions have stepped in to provide some support or resources (e.g., reduced course load, increased access to advising, expanded online courses), often people will still need to stop out of college because life demands it. Regardless of why students stop out, many want and intend to return but find that it is not easy to come back to a system not designed to support their needs.

To better understand what colleges can do to reengage the significant number of SCNC Californians, we spoke with 52 adult learners who had stopped out, reenrolled (and thus are known as “comebackers”), and successfully earned a degree (or would do so the following semester) at California State University, Sacramento State, or Shasta-Tehama-Trinity Joint Community College District (Shasta College; see Appendix A, page 18). We did this work in partnership with CaliforniaAttain!,<sup>10</sup> a collaborative group of institutional and regional partners who are committed to helping adults earn a credential or degree that will lead to a life-sustaining wage (see Appendix B, pages 18-19).

Our analysis found four main actions that colleges can take to better support comebackers: 1) adapt to meet the needs of today’s students, 2) conduct strategic outreach, 3) remove reenrollment barriers, and 4) provide ongoing support.

Many of the recommended actions echo findings from existing research and ongoing institutional and statewide efforts. The recommendations range from systemic improvements requiring significant coordination across a campus to more localized, department-level changes.<sup>11,12,13</sup> Implementing these changes would make higher education more accessible to comebackers. In addition, if colleges evolve policies and practices to be more student-centered, it would result in a system that is better able to meet the needs of today’s college-going population at large.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “COMEBACKERS”?

This report refers to comebackers as a distinct group of students, but we also see them as overlapping with two larger groups: those with some college, no credential and adult learners. Below, we define each group:



**Some college, no credential:** Someone who has attended college but has not yet earned a credential or degree



**Adult learner:** Any college student ages 25 to 64 or one who has adult-like responsibilities (e.g., has a dependent or is working full time)



**Comebacker:** Anyone who has attended college, stopped out (for any length of time), and later returned to college (their original institution or another institution)



# Adapt to Meet the Needs of Today's Students

## » Increase Flexible Learning Modalities and Structures

The biggest takeaway from this study's findings is that comebackers are unified in their call for higher education to adapt to meet their needs. For comebackers, this means having flexibility in terms of when and how they access and engage in learning, for example, through online courses, accelerated programs, HyFlex learning models,<sup>14</sup> credit for prior learning, and competency-based education.

Many of the comebackers we spoke with were enrolled in Shasta College's Accelerated College Education (ACE) Program,<sup>15</sup> and they cited the fully online format as pivotal to their ability to return to and complete college. Students also cited as helpful the shorter terms (8 weeks rather than the traditional 16-week semester), which allowed them to focus on one or two classes at a time and provided more on-ramps to returning.

To better meet the needs of comebackers, colleges could take the following actions:

- **Expand the number and breadth of online courses:** Interest in online courses is strong and growing, and it will be key to enrolling and reenrolling students.<sup>16</sup>
- **Increase the number of fully online degree programs:** For some students, enrolling in a fully online program is the only way they can earn a credential or degree. Programs that have successfully attracted and propelled adult learners to completion include ACE and Sacramento State's College of Continuing Education.
- **Restructure academic calendars:** It is highly disruptive to their progress if students miss the registration deadline and have to wait months to reenroll, or if a life circumstance pops up in the middle of a 16-week semester and they need to stop out. By offering courses on a more accelerated academic term, colleges can increase entry points, offer more flexibility (leading to possibly fewer midterm withdrawals), and allow students to focus their time and attention on fewer classes at one time, all while taking the same number of classes per academic year, thus maintaining full-time status.

### STUDENT VOICE: ANGEL

Angel went through an unexpected divorce and became the sole caregiver for her daughter, making attendance at in-person classes a challenge. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she was able to capitalize on the many online class options available, and her efforts were bolstered by the support of a new boss and financial aid benefits available to single parents. She said:

*"I think that's why the online aspect for me was so much better. I could literally do [college] with my kid sitting right next to me. We could do our homework together. It made it a lot easier for me."*

The online classes and critical support Angel received were what she needed to complete her associate of arts degree in liberal studies in 2021.





## Conduct Strategic Outreach

### » Reach Out to Students Who Stop Out

The vast majority of our interviewees reported receiving no communication from the college after they stopped out. Some recalled receiving a form email about reenrolling that felt impersonal and was not very helpful in their current situation. Many surmised that a warm outreach from the college could have shortened their time to reenrollment and completion. Research on promising reengagement practices suggests that reaching out to students who have a record of continuous enrollment and who do not enroll in the following academic term can yield positive outcomes.<sup>17</sup> This effort should be as personalized as possible, ideally done as a direct contact via phone call or text message, and should seek to accomplish the following:

- **Determine the reason for the stop-out:** Probe for reasons why the student has stopped out, if they intend to return, and how long the stop-out may last. Then add this information to the student's institutional file.
- **Direct student to resources:** If a student plans to reenroll, connect them with campus resources that may help address the reason(s) for the stop-out (e.g., by providing mental health support, financial aid, or academic support). If they are not able to return immediately, seek to connect them with community-based organizations and resources.
- **Provide follow-up:** Chart a path and timeline for when the student decides to return, seeking to minimize challenges and confusion. If the student does not plan to return (or is unsure if or when they might return), set up a plan to follow up in six months

#### STUDENT VOICE: ANTHONY

Anthony is a first-generation college student who started at the local community college right after high school, paying for it himself. He juggled full-time work and academics until his being placed on academic probation led him to stop out. He received no communication from the school about his status and ways to return. He said:

*"I didn't get a call; I didn't get anything. So I kind of just felt alone."*

The shift to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed him to balance his work and class schedules and facilitated his return. With support from his wife, who pursued graduate studies alongside him, Anthony earned his bachelor of arts degree in Spanish in 2022.

### » Use Inclusive Marketing Materials and Language

When asked how colleges might get more adult learners or comebackers to return, some of our study participants felt that it was important to see people "like them" reflected on the website and in print and virtual ads, and for all materials and staff to employ inclusive language that reassures students they are welcome at the college. The following are some actions that colleges could take to be more inclusive:

- **Market to a diverse array of students:** Visual marketing materials (online and print) should showcase students of all ages and also target learners who may have different goals and concerns (e.g., less focus on the "college experience" and more information about course flexibility, online options, child care, and job placement).

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- **Use inclusive language and phrasing:** Review materials to ensure that the language used is inclusive of different types of learners, pathways, and educational outcomes, and provide training for staff and faculty on preferred terminology.
- **Change historical narratives:** Refrain from using the terms “traditional” and “nontraditional” when referring to students, as this only reifies categories that no longer reflect today’s demographic reality (e.g., such dated terms draw a distinction between 18- to 24-year-old, first-time, full-time students and all other students).
- **Avoid assumptions:** Remove language that might marginalize adult students, for example, language that refers to high school experiences or parental permission, or that assumes the students have no outside-of-school responsibilities.
- **Remove barriers:** Take note of programs or applications that ask for high school GPA, transcripts, or activities, and consider whether that information is essential. If it is, then clarify that applicants can instead include information about employment or work experience.
- **Remain positive:** Specific to comebackers, abstain from talking about or treating them as having failed. All emails, texts, and other communications to students should be positive in nature, reassuring them that life happens and barriers to education can be overcome (similar to the following recommendation to alter the tone of academic probation notifications).

**STUDENT VOICE: MIA**

Mia, a first-generation student living in a rural area, was placed on academic probation at Sacramento State and stopped out one semester away from graduation. She decided to return but missed the application deadline and had to wait another 16 weeks, delaying her timeline to completion by half a year. She felt that the four-year college narrative was harmful to her as a comebacker and minimized her academic success. She noted:

*“That model of four years just doesn’t apply all the time. I feel like that’s one of the main things that I didn’t like. I felt a lot of pressure to follow within that time frame and follow those lines. I felt like I was failing if I was going over. I think there’s a more realistic way to put things as opposed to painting this picture-perfect image of a four-year institution.”*

She completed a bachelor of arts degree in liberal studies in 2022.

## » Reframe Academic Probation and Provide Support

Many of the comebackers we spoke with were placed on academic probation early in their college career, and this notification often led to their stopping out. Nearly all of these students did not receive any follow-up after the initial notification, while a few recalled receiving a generic email devoid of any resources or guidance. Many students were unaware of the options and resources available to them, resulting in their hastily making decisions that impeded a timely return to college or progress toward degree attainment.

To shift so that academic probation practices are more student-centered and supportive, colleges could take the following steps:

- **Conduct a landscape analysis:** Analyze the current academic probation policies and practices, including criteria

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for probation, notification letters, enrollment implications (e.g., holds or loss of priority registration), and pathways to regaining good academic standing.

- **Reframe academic probation:** Frame the notification of academic probation as a temporary setback rather than a failure or punishment. Consider use of terms like “academic warning” or “academic notice” to avoid the negative connotations associated with probation.<sup>18</sup>
- **Do not wait for cumulative GPA to drop:** While students should be placed on academic probation or notice based only on their cumulative GPA,<sup>19</sup> a failing single-term GPA could be used as a warning signal and opportunity for the college to reach out to the student and offer support.
- **Encourage early faculty outreach:** Encourage instructors to contact students who are in danger of failing midcourse, to discuss a path toward successful completion of the course and to ensure that the student is aware of their grading and withdrawal options.
- **Connect advisors with students:** Within 1–2 weeks of the students being notified, advisors could reach out to all students placed on academic notice. Advisors should seek to understand what led to the failing grade(s) and connect the student to resources and individualized support. The outreach should also explain the full range of options (e.g., withdrawal, leave of absence, repeating classes) available to students, along with any possible effects on their financial aid. Advisors should help students select the best path forward based on their circumstances.
- **Offer a “reset” or support class:** After students are placed on academic notice, consider offering or mandating a reset class (for one unit or no credit) that focuses on academic skills and mindset. The class could be taken during the term after a student is notified.

**STUDENT VOICE: RICK**

Rick had faced academic and mental health challenges since high school, and when he transferred to college, he struggled without a supportive community.

*“I was alerted to the fact that I was doing poorly, and I was on academic probation, which is just a way of the college being like, ‘Hey, we noticed you were struggling. By the way, you suck at doing these things. We’re gonna watch you closer now.’”*

He received the notification through the student portal and never received any follow-up from the college.

*“That seems weird that a college would never consider trying to do a personal reach-out thing, because I would think that would be a great way to go.”*

Despite the lack of institutional outreach, Rick persisted and earned his bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering in 2022.



## Remove Reenrollment Barriers

### » Reinstatement Students' Priority Registration Status upon Return

Colleges often award students priority registration, meaning that they are able to enroll in classes before the rest of the general student body based on seniority or membership in a certain group (e.g., armed forces, foster youth). When students return after a longer stop-out, they are often treated as new students. This means they lose their priority registration status (based on units), are among the last permitted to register, and encounter some classes already being full by the time they enroll.

Many of our participants noted that losing their registration status hindered their ability to get into the courses they needed to stay on track to completion. To help comebackers make timely progress toward earning their certificate or degree, colleges could reinstate students' registration status from the time they were last enrolled, regardless of their academic standing.

#### STUDENT VOICE: LAURA

Laura, a single mother working full time, had trouble registering for the classes she needed upon her return to Sacramento State 20 years after her initial enrollment. She said:

*"When I went back, [I] was tossed to the bottom of the priority list, when I was so close to being done. That was the most frustrating thing, to have zero priority."*

Despite her registration troubles, she was able to complete a bachelor of arts degree in criminal justice in 2021.

### » Review Catalog Rights Policies

The term "catalog rights" refers to the requirements and rules that a student must satisfy to qualify to earn their certificate or degree. Catalog rights are normally based on the academic year in which the student first enrolled at the college, require continuous enrollment, and are honored for a set number of years. This means that students who stop out for longer than one year may lose their catalog rights and may have to fulfill new degree or general education requirements when they return. For many comebackers, losing catalog rights resulted in their having to take additional courses (often unexpectedly and, in their estimation, unnecessarily) and delay their time to program completion. To help address this barrier, colleges could review their catalog rights policy and consider how it impacts comebackers.

### » Offer Credit for Prior Learning

Credit for prior learning (CPL) awards students college credits for skills and knowledge gained outside of the accredited college classroom.<sup>20</sup> Many of the comebackers we spoke with, especially those who had been out of college for many years, had significant professional and life experience, but none of them mentioned having received CPL. CPL has been shown to accelerate degree attainment,<sup>21</sup> and it would be an especially valuable tool in reenrolling comebackers, particularly comebackers of color, and helping them make timely progress toward completion.<sup>22, 23</sup> Colleges could start by examining their current policies on CPL to understand if and how they might expand the program.

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## » Help Students Overcome Failed Grades

Many comebacker students had failed one or more classes at some point in their academic career, greatly impeding their academic progress, regardless of how long ago the failing grades were recorded or how well they performed after returning. Some students placed on academic probation lost access to financial aid and needed to raise their GPA to regain access to aid—a common catch-22 whereby students cannot reenroll and improve their grades without financial aid, and cannot get financial aid unless they reenroll and improve their grades. For students who had a high number of college credits, raising their GPA above the 2.0 threshold took multiple terms; for those who did not have financial aid, this came at a significant cost. To help students overcome failed grades, colleges could review academic policies related to grades and weigh how they impact comebackers. Colleges could consider practices such as grade forgiveness or academic renewal,<sup>24</sup> and advise students on strategies for raising their GPA and addressing failing grades on their transcript.

## » Waive Application Requirements and Fees

Many of the comebackers we spoke with faced significant hurdles to reenrolling, including having to fill out long intake forms, submit transcripts, and pay fees. They were essentially treated like new students. To remove barriers to reenrolling, colleges could examine policies for students who are returning to the institution and consider adjusting or waiving entirely certain fees and requirements, regardless of the length of a student's stop-out.

## » Forgive Institutional Debt

A number of the comebackers we spoke with mentioned having outstanding institutional debt (including library or parking fines, or more substantial course fees) that they had to address to return to college. Research has shown that decreasing fees and forgiving debt not only increases reenrollment but, counterintuitively, also increase revenues.<sup>25</sup> This policy may be an especially valuable marketing tool for encouraging students who are near-completers to return to the institution,<sup>26</sup> and it could save some from incurring additional debt that may be high risk.

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### STUDENT VOICE: ELSA

Elsa had lost her status as an active student due to academic probation. When she wanted to reenroll, she had to start from scratch, as if she had never attended. She said:

*“They should have just accepted me because I was there already. Rather than seeing me as a ‘new’ student, they charged me extra money. I was there already, they should have had all my paperwork. It would have been easy just to say ‘Oh, okay, you’re here! That’s fine. Just pay your tuition and go back to class!’”*

She was able to complete her bachelor of science degree in public health administration in 2023.

## » Offer Payment Plans and Other Forms of Financial Assistance

Many of the comebackers we spoke with lost the majority of their financial aid because they were enrolled part time, were on academic probation, or exhausted their eligibility. While the students we spoke with found a way to cover their costs (sometimes taking out high-interest personal loans or taking on extra work at the sacrifice of their studies), a lack of financial aid is a huge barrier for many who want to return to college.

Actions that colleges could take to help students financially include the following:

- **Provide tuition assistance programs:** Provide alternate ways for students to fund their return until financial aid can be reinstated. Such programs could take the form of clearly defined, low-cost payment plans.
- **Offer incentives:** Offer book vouchers, course waivers, or one-time grants to get students who are near completion across the finish line.
- **Drop full-time enrollment requirements:** Consider altering enrollment requirements for comebackers or all adult learners for programs such as Extended Opportunity Programs and Services or the California College Promise Program.
- **Adjust course schedules:** Restructure the semester from 16 weeks to 8-week terms, to allow students to take fewer classes at one time while maintaining their full-time status and, thus, their access to certain benefits.
- **Explore employer tuition benefits:** Many employers offer college tuition benefits, yet many employees/potential or current students do not fully understand or take advantage of the benefits. College staff could help make students aware of benefits and learn how to apply for and use them.

### STUDENT VOICE: LATOYA

Latoya is a single mom of three who had been taking classes part time and went over her six-year Pell Grant limit. She noted:

*“There was no way for me to further my education and go back to school. So, I had to come up with the money myself to do my last two semesters. They did have a payment plan, but the payment plan was so expensive. ... It was adding up where I was not able to afford that.”*

She worked an extra job specifically to cover the cost of school. In 2021, she completed a bachelor of arts degree in social work.

## » Develop a Comebacker-Specific Orientation

A number of students expressed anxiety about returning to college after a long stop-out and about the increased use of technology (especially for online courses and programs). Comebackers said they would have been better supported with a specific orientation program for returning students, one that was especially mindful of those who may be returning after a prolonged stop-out. This program could take the form of an in-person workshop, creating a safe space for students to meet one another and learn more about various campus resources, or as a series of videos to be viewed asynchronously via a student portal. The orientation could include basic information on what students can expect upon their return, perhaps with testimonials from fellow comebackers, welcome messages from key staff, and basic training for the online learning platform and other technology tools.



## Provide Ongoing Support

### » Provide Adult-Focused Advising

Comebackers, as well as all students who have adult responsibilities, have diverse needs and are often juggling multiple commitments in addition to school. The students we spoke with expressed a need for flexible access to advisors who could offer holistic support. Many also noted the value of continuity in advising relationships. Some actions colleges could take to meet these needs include the following:

- **Provide dedicated advising for comebackers:** This could mean assigning a single advisor who serves as the point person for comebackers, or providing training for all advisors on the needs and specific concerns of comebackers. Colleges could also seek to hire comebackers as advisors and ensure that advising staff represent a variety of learner identities and pathways.
- **Set up advising teams:** Advising teams could include multiple staff members who work together to support the student from reenrollment to graduation, offering continuity and a buffer in case of staff turnover.
- **Hire a success coach:** This coach would provide support to comebackers beyond academics, including time management skills and mindset, and help students access additional resources.

#### STUDENT VOICE: JENNIFER

Jennifer struggled academically, was placed on academic probation, and dismissed from the institution multiple times. When she returned to campus, she had to meet with a different counselor every time, which was frustrating for her. She said:

*"I met with academic counselors but was frustrated that it was never the same one. ... [T]here was just no consistency with that. I didn't have a relationship, which I really wished I did. I think having the consistency of understanding my story and not having to repeat is important."*

She graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in women's studies in 2022.

### » Leverage Online Resources

Because many adult learners return to college with significant outside responsibilities and limited time to engage in structured activities, students need access to resources, information, and support through online options. Some actions that colleges could take to meet this need include the following:

- **Add online student support services:** These services could include counseling, financial aid, tutoring, and public benefits. Providing these services online would help ensure equitable access for students regardless of learning modality.
- **Create an online portal:** This would serve as the first place a returning student could go for help. This one-stop shop would house resources and information specific to comebackers about returning, reenrolling, and accessing resources to help them get to completion.
- **Develop online chat features:** Leverage the strengths of artificial intelligence to increase accessibility to basic information and lessen demands on staff.

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## » Facilitate a Community of Support

Many comebackers expressed strong interest in getting to know other comebackers and people their age or at similar life stages, as a way to build community and peer support. At those campuses offering in-person classes, consider providing a dedicated physical space that allows comebackers to congregate and connect when they are on campus. For online programs, community-building efforts may involve facilitating online events so people can meet virtually and/or offering tools for students to collaborate on projects.

## » Take the Uncertainty Out of Academic Planning and Progress

Many of the comebackers we spoke with were less interested in academic exploration and more concerned with knowing what classes to take and in what order. Some expressed a strong desire for a set educational plan to reduce anxiety around course selection and registration, as well as guidance to help them avoid taking extra units that did not count toward their degree. Some actions colleges could take include the following:

- **Require meetings to create structured schedules or academic plans:** Building on efforts such as the Program Pathways Mapper or Guided Pathways,<sup>27, 28</sup> a requirement that comebackers meet with an advisor prior to or during the student's first term after reenrollment would help reduce uncertainty about what courses to take and in what term and order. This would help comebackers earn their credential or degree in a timely manner.
- **Provide an accessible course management system:** This would allow students to track their progress and know exactly what courses they need to complete their program. This will likely require coordination among academic advising, information technology (IT), and the registrar's office, to ensure that degree audits are up to date.

### STUDENT VOICE: BRUCE

Bruce was able to return to complete his degree due to the support he felt from and the community he found in his academic department and the availability of online classes. He is a first-generation student and a father who had stopped out due to an addiction disorder but returned when he became sober. He said:

*"It's just that piece of inclusivity, where you feel like you're a part of it. You have a group of people around you, and you know you're not alone."*

He completed his bachelor of arts degree in communications in 2021.

### STUDENT VOICE: ELIZABETH

Elizabeth returned a decade after her first enrollment, when she recognized that she needed a degree to advance in her career. She enrolled in a structured program and found the direction helpful. She noted:

*"They have, like, a set-up pathway for us. My whole associate's degree, all my classes, are already planned out. So I don't even have to go and research what classes I need to take. That makes it super-simple for me."*

She is currently pursuing her associate of arts degree in business.



# Now Is the Time to Reengage, Reenroll, and Propel Adult Learners to Success

The 52 comebackers we spoke with pointed to the significant hurdles facing the SCNC population and, more broadly, adult learners and those with adult responsibilities. They suggested ways that institutions can shift to be more inclusive and student-centered. While some changes, such as creating new marketing materials, can be handled more immediately, others, such as offering more online programs, will require significant restructuring and investment. Regardless of the level of effort, meeting the needs of these students is imperative to the vitality of California’s public institutions and our state. Many institutions are facing declining enrollment numbers, and California is facing a shortage of college-educated workers, who are necessary to maintain our state’s economic strength. The millions of adult learners who have some college but no credential or degree represent a critical piece of the solution to our state’s needs. Public higher education must adapt to better reengage and reenroll these students and propel them to completion—working from setbacks to comebacks, these students are our present and future.

## AN ADDITIONAL RESOURCE FOR MAKING YOUR INSTITUTION ADULT LEARNER FRIENDLY



To assist institutions in thinking through how to better serve adult learners, the Shasta College Attainment and Innovation Lab for Equity and Success Center for California Community Colleges have coauthored a resource, [“Improving Equity and Completion: An Adult Learner Toolkit for California Community Colleges.”](#) The toolkit focuses on key areas of access and student support, course modality, and affordability, and is accompanied by guiding questions and resources to help spur colleges to action.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A. Methods

### Participant Recruitment

We set the following parameters for our population of interest: individuals who were previously enrolled at Sacramento State or Shasta College (and completed enough units to be considered full time for one term), stopped out for at least two consecutive terms, reenrolled, ages 25–54 at reenrollment, and either currently enrolled (spring 2023) or had completed a certificate or degree.

Both colleges provided a list of students who met the criteria, going back 10 years. We then sent emails to students in batches, inviting them to sign up for an interview. We sent up to six emails, made phone calls, and sent text messages.

### Sample

We spoke with 52 students. More than half of the sample identify as women (56%), and 50 percent are parents. Almost two-thirds (65%) identify as White, 19 percent as Hispanic, and 6 percent each as Black, multiracial, or other. More than half (55%) were students at Sacramento State, and 45 percent were from Shasta College. At the time of their interview, 79 percent had completed their certificate or degree, and 21 percent were currently enrolled (10 at Shasta and 1 at Sacramento State).

### Analytic Approach

All interviews followed a semi-structured process, meaning that we, at times, deviated from our protocol to probe what seemed like the most fruitful areas of conversation. Our main protocol focused on the various stages of participants' academic journeys—going to college initially, stopping out, deciding to return, experiencing college as a comebacker, and getting to completion.

We collected field notes on each interview and recorded all interviews on Zoom. These recordings were transcribed by a third party. Our research team divided the transcripts for analysis and summarizing. We intentionally reviewed other team members' interviews to increase

our familiarity with the broader dataset. We maintained a running document of themes, in which we noted observations and prevalence. This document served as the outline of our main themes and helped us organize our findings. We organized findings into three main time points (stop-out, reenrollment, and completion), and we worked in a collaborative and iterative process to refine our observations and select exemplary quotes and stories. We shared our findings with our CaliforniaAttain! partners at multiple points throughout the analysis process to check the validity of our takeaways and collaborate on recommendations.

Since the primary purpose of this report is to reflect students' viewpoints accurately, we have incorporated direct quotes from students. However, actual names and demographics have been omitted for privacy reasons, and all participants are referred to by their chosen pseudonym. Further, because the goal is not to make generalizations or appear to represent the larger student population, we do not provide counts and instead use terms such as “few” or “many” to describe any sentiment that was shared by more than one or two participants.

## Appendix B. Research Partnership

[CaliforniaAttain!](#) is a collaborative research partnership among California Competes, California State University, Sacramento State, the Shasta-Tehama-Trinity Joint Community College District (Shasta College), and ProjectAttain! (an independent, community-based nonprofit focused on adult learners). The collaborative was formed to support the approximately 300,000 residents in the Sacramento region and 227,000 residents in the Far North region with some college education but no credential or degree.



Members of CaliforniaAttain! include the following individuals:

- **Laura Bernhard**, senior researcher, California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy
- **Diana Cabori**, managing director, ProjectAttain!
- **Melanie Dixon**, executive director, ProjectAttain!
- **Ben Fell**, interim associate dean of academic and professional programs, Sacramento State
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- **Kate Mahar**, associate vice president of innovation and strategic initiatives, Shasta College
- **Jenni Murphy**, interim vice president for enrollment and engagement, Sacramento State
- **Buffy Tanner**, director of innovation and special projects, Shasta College

CaliforniaAttain! serves as both a community of practice and a research-practitioner partnership. The current study is part of a two-year grant-funded initiative focusing on the comebacker student population at Sacramento State and Shasta College. The first year included study design and data collection and analysis, and the second year will focus on the development, implementation, and evaluation of selected initiatives at each campus.

### **Participatory Action Research**

In addition to the involvement of key staff at the participating institutions and regional nonprofit throughout the research process, a key component of the study is the inclusion of comebacker students as co-researchers. This research design is modeled after participatory action research, a method in which community members are integrated into the decision-making and positioned as researchers rather than as objects of the research.<sup>29</sup>



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