Issue Brief

Family Literacy: A Valuable Gateway to Postsecondary Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a large and growing gap between the educational levels needed to qualify for 21st century jobs and the attainment levels of American workers. Eighty percent of jobs in today’s economy require some education beyond a high school degree, yet only 53 percent of Americans earn some kind of postsecondary degree or credential.\(^1,2\)

Although college enrollment has grown nearly 35 percent since 1970, the college completion rate has remained flat.\(^3\) The failure of students to complete college once they have enrolled can be attributed to, among other things, lack of preparation for postsecondary educational demands, financial barriers, and balancing work and family life. Pursuing and completing a college education can be especially challenging given that 20 percent of community college students are married with children and 15 percent are heading single parent households.\(^4\)

Although adult college students face multiple obstacles, they can have a great impact if they stay in school, because they are affecting, and serving as a role model to, the next generation.

Based on research and experience, the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) strongly believes that strengthening the capacity and interaction of family literacy programs and community colleges is the recommended approach to increasing the rate of postsecondary degree completion. Only by improving literacy in the family structure can we impact multiple generations. And, because the basic infrastructure already exists, results can be achieved more quickly and more efficiently using existing, but sometimes reallocated, resources. Partnerships between family literacy programs and community colleges can increase the success of nontraditional students by engaging them early in the postsecondary education transition process and by building working partnerships to integrate and align their existing high-quality practices for the successful transition of students.

By maximizing existing and prospective federal, state and local resources, family literacy programs and community colleges can implement the following specific solutions to transition more adults to postsecondary education:

- Use newly released materials created by NCFL to help Hispanic parents and other adults unfamiliar with the U.S. college system fill the gap between the high educational aspirations they have for their children and their children’s successful postsecondary educational achievement (www.famlit.org/myfamilygoestocollege).
- Provide financial support and mentoring to students who transition to postsecondary education in order to increase students’ retention and graduation rates.

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With support from MetLife Foundation
• Align family literacy program curriculum with community college curriculum and strengthen General Educational Development (GED®) test preparation curriculum so that students are better prepared for college coursework.

Because family literacy programs serve entire families, they are uniquely positioned not only to help parents recognize the value of education, but also to prepare themselves and their children for postsecondary education. This approach reaps a double reward by raising the skill levels of adults while simultaneously raising the aspirations of children for higher education and training.

INTRODUCTION

It is essential that our nation develop new strategies to ensure that more citizens not only graduate from high school, but also attain a postsecondary degree or credential. The current administration is calling for renewed commitment and new approaches to lower the nation’s high school dropout rate, ensure that high school graduates are prepared for higher education, and make the United States the world’s leader in the proportion of college graduates by 2020.5

There is plenty of data to highlight the critical need for implementing programs that work:

• Among minority students, slightly more than half of African-American and Hispanic students are completing high school on time.6

• Only about one-third of high school graduates have the skills they need to succeed in college and the 21st century workforce.7

• The median wage for workers with no college education is near the poverty line for a family of four.8

• Only about 53 percent of Americans earn some kind of degree or credential after high school, a figure that drops to about 25 percent for low-income students.9

• Eighty percent of jobs in today’s economy require some education beyond a high school degree.10

Although bachelor degree attainment is important, helping adults attain a two-year degree, an occupational certificate or apprenticeship is also valuable. The demand for workers in “middle skill” occupational categories, such as healthcare, construction, and transportation jobs, which require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree, is projected to remain robust relative to supply.11 In addition, more education positively impacts earnings over a person’s lifetime. For example, adults with associate degrees earn, on average, 25 percent more than those with a high school diploma do, and this gap is expected to widen by 2030.12

Helping more Americans obtain some kind of postsecondary education is the key to our nation’s competitive and economic success. Although it represents a significant challenge, simply raising high school graduation rates and transitioning more people to college and postsecondary training programs is not enough. It is just as imperative to ensure that they stay, succeed and graduate from their postsecondary education programs. So, how do we guarantee that they graduate from these programs? With adult and parenting literacy services already in place, family literacy programs offer an effective, efficient approach not only to encourage more adults to enroll in postsecondary education or training, but also to help counteract the myriad problems that cause individuals to drop out before completion of a postsecondary degree or credential. Family literacy programs provide a supportive, academic environment for adult learners and their children by raising academic performance and providing the tools to convert educational aspirations into a reality for the entire family. When family literacy program students enroll in college or postsecondary training programs, they demonstrate a motivation to learn and an acknowledgement that additional education is important for themselves and their families.
In addition, these programs have proven to be ideal in reaching the growing Hispanic community—73 percent of program students indicate they are of Hispanic/Latino descent. Although Hispanics have lower levels of educational attainment compared to non-Hispanic Whites, Hispanic families often have high aspirations for their children to pursue higher education. However, they need resources and support to help them achieve this goal.

This issue brief examines the ways in which family literacy and adult education programs can strengthen the transition and trajectory of nontraditional students, including ways in which community colleges and family literacy programs can partner to transition more adults into education and training beyond the General Educational Development (GED®) credential. It also identifies tools and resources for family literacy programs that wish to expand their focus on postsecondary education preparation and offers recommendations for adult education and family literacy programs, community colleges, and policymakers to help make attainment of a postsecondary education degree or credential a reality for more adults.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN: ASPIRATION, TRANSITION, AND GRADUATION

The country needs a systematic approach to expand and promote family literacy programs as a gateway to higher education and training. With a grant from MetLife Foundation, the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) researched ways in which family literacy programs can increase the number of adult learners transitioning to postsecondary education/training and completing the requirements for degrees or training credentials. The research identified a number of opportunities, including creating and strengthening community college-family literacy program partnerships, and guided the creation of resources to support family literacy program practitioners, community college staff, and Hispanic parents and their children in the quest for higher education. These recommendations and materials also are well-suited for other first-generation college families.

Family literacy program practitioners are committed to encouraging the aspirations and academic achievement of parents and children together and to enabling study beyond high school. Most family literacy program students say they are attending to learn English, get a job or a better job, or attain a GED credential, while slightly less than half identify “college preparation or training” as their reason for attending the program. Programs can do a great deal to encourage adults to continue their formal education beyond attaining a GED credential. This step is critical, but it alone is not enough to prepare adults for the opportunities and challenges that come with pursuing a postsecondary education. Students also need information about how to study, strategies to navigate college culture and sustain enrollment, and steps necessary for completing a degree or certificate program. Family literacy programs provide a supportive, accessible environment from which students can make the transition to higher education. The following sections outline recommendations for adult education and family literacy programs, community colleges, and policymakers and describe resources NCFL created to advance students’ postsecondary success.

WHAT FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS CAN DO

Start early

During research conducted by NCFL of family literacy programs, staff from one program stressed that raising awareness of the value of postsecondary education and/or career training/certification should take place early in the program curriculum. For students who are unfamiliar with the educational system in the United States or may be the first in their family to consider college, starting the dialogue about higher education early and integrating messages about the value of higher education throughout the family literacy program experience is critical.

It is important for family literacy programs to address students’ primary goals, which may include improving English or financial literacy, obtaining a GED credential, or supporting a child’s education. However, programs also can increase the number of students transitioning to postsecondary education if they introduce all students to the possibility of attending college and what is required to be successful in a postsecondary education program. Because program staff may need resources and/or training to better address students’ needs and support their trajectory toward postsecondary education, NCFL has created Promoting Post-Secondary Educational Success for Adults and Families, a practical
partnership guide to help programs partner with community colleges and help adults progress from family literacy programs to postsecondary education. The guide contains practical information about what it takes to make a partnership work, outlines the responsibilities of each entity in the partnership, and details how the partnership can be successful over time.

**Address the unique needs of the Hispanic population**

In the United States, 39 percent of the Hispanic population age 25 and older has not completed high school or received a GED credential. This could mean that many adult education and family literacy students of Hispanic origin may be unfamiliar with how to prepare for postsecondary education in the United States or with the importance of additional education in gaining employment. In addition, a recent Pew Hispanic Trust survey revealed that while “nearly nine-in-ten (89 percent) Latino young adults ages 16 to 25 say that a college education is important for success in life, only about half that number (48 percent) say that they themselves plan to get a college degree,” a finding that highlights the importance of motivation and support for this population.

Few resources are available in Spanish to help those who speak English as a second language prepare themselves or their children for higher education. In response to these findings, NCFL created “En camino: Herramientas educativas para familias” (On Our Way: An Educational Toolkit for Families), a series of culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate Spanish online modules. These modules serve two generations simultaneously; helping parents understand the culture of college and consider attending themselves, in addition to preparing their children for college.

**Provide dual enrollment support**

Forty-three percent of all community college students are placed in remedial education courses. Because these are noncredit courses and do not fulfill community college program requirements, many adult students pay for the courses, get no course credit, and quickly deplete their financial aid resources. In order to overcome these barriers, adult education and family literacy programs have developed creative solutions, such as providing dual enrollment, where students take a free developmental course at the literacy program and are also enrolled in a credit-bearing course at the college. This arrangement allows students to keep benefits, such as childcare or transportation assistance, while in school.

Programs also can continue to provide mentorship and encouragement for students who have made the transition to postsecondary education. For example, some programs hold celebratory events for students who complete their first semester in college, a time when many students are adjusting to the rigors of college and are at the greatest risk of dropping out.

Finally, programs can put together a number of resources that provide a comprehensive support network for students. For example, a program in Austin, Texas, provides a variety of “wrap-around services” for students who enroll in postsecondary education, including weekly class meetings with a career counselor, financial assistance with tuition and books, childcare vouchers, and referrals for additional supports, such as transportation and mental health assistance, when necessary. Other family literacy programs have explored creative solutions, such as hiring former students to work as administrative assistants or program liaisons, as a way to provide financial support and flexible scheduling for transitioning students.

**WHAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES CAN DO**

Community colleges offer a clear pathway for first-generation college students and recent GED credential recipients to pursue higher education, but often need support to help bolster student success. For example, they may have adult students who have received a GED credential, but need additional work to be college ready. Often these students and others face financial and family challenges. NCFL has developed Promoting Post-Secondary Educational Success for Adults and Families—A Practical Partnership Guide, a resource that examines what it takes to make a family literacy-community college partnership work. The guide outlines the responsibilities of each entity in the partnership and how a successful partnership can be sustained over time.

**Help programs with alignment**

Alignment, or using curricula in family literacy programs that effectively prepare adult students for the academic coursework or training requirements at the community college, is frequently overlooked. GED test preparation, which is the focus of many family literacy programs, does not guarantee that students possess the college-ready life skills or academic knowledge to successfully enter and graduate from college. Aligning GED preparation and testing with Common Core State Standards for college and

With the help of community college staff, many family literacy programs have bolstered their GED test preparation coursework to align with coursework offered by their local community colleges. For example, in a state-sponsorhip pilot project, staff at three Wyoming community colleges evaluated the extent to which math courses in a GED test preparation classroom were preparing students for college-level work. They determined that the coursework needed enhancement, and so they developed post-GED test math classes to teach concepts adults needed to succeed in the local community college.  

Develop formalized working relationships with programs

Formal agreements between community colleges and adult education and family literacy programs define the purpose of the partnership and describe the contributions of and benefits to each partner. NCFL found that, in many cases, designing and delivering new services is unnecessary. Rather, agreements can describe programs and services the college already has in place, such as implementing flexible schedules or delivering courses at more convenient locations, and how they can best be accessed by GED-ready students. To learn more about formal agreements and steps for establishing successful partnerships, see Promoting Post-Secondary Educational Success for Adults and Families—A Practical Partnership Guide; www.famlit.org/myfamilygoestocollege.

The process of enrolling in college, considering financial aid options, and tackling course work can be daunting for an adult student who has just obtained a GED credential and is the first in his or her family to attend college. Family literacy programs are an ideal environment in which to support students as they enter postsecondary education. However, policymakers must be aware that as family literacy programs widen their focus from that of GED test preparation to moving more students into and supporting them through postsecondary education, there are additional needs.

Increase federal funding for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title II and state funding for adult education and family literacy

Additional resources are needed to provide family literacy staff with high quality professional development so that they may add rigor to their curricula and align content with college courses. In addition, increased funding can empower coordinators to broker partnerships with colleges and supportive service providers, such as early childhood programs and public transportation agencies. These resources are necessary to support adult learners as they obtain a postsecondary education.

Increase co-enrollment in WIA Title I programs

Through its examination of family literacy-community college partnerships, NCFL identified a lack of awareness and connection between programs and services. For example, the WIA Title I Adult Program offers employment and training services, and WIA Title II offers adult education and literacy activities, which include family literacy services. Unfortunately, these programs often don’t work together. Increasing and encouraging more WIA Title I co-enrollment would allow more family literacy students access to the types of support services they need to be successful as they transition to postsecondary education and training. To achieve this, NCFL supports the recommendation that states should be required to increase the percentage of co-enrolled students and strengthen connections between Title I and Title II.
Fund innovation
Just as Congress and the Administration have encouraged innovation in the K-12 setting, NCFL encourages similar support for innovative approaches in the adult education and family literacy field that create pathways to postsecondary education for adult and parent learners. Program services like those offered in Austin, Texas, and mentioned earlier in this brief, should be replicated in programs throughout the nation.

FREE RESOURCES FOR ADULT EDUCATION, FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Adult education and family literacy program providers serve high-need students at a crucial juncture—when students enter the program to earn a GED credential and possibly, to continue their education beyond that level. The support, skills and knowledge that students receive through adult education are essential pieces in creating a desire and an ability to transition to postsecondary education. And, for students who also are parents, these pieces provide an important opportunity to influence the next generation.

The following products were created by NCFL to fill a gap in resources that outline practical ways to help students and families most in need. In addition, the products are designed to support the likelihood of Hispanic (and other first-generation college) families transitioning into college and other postsecondary educational opportunities.

Best practices for community colleges and family literacy partnerships
Turning Points: A Case Study of Family Literacy-Community College Partnerships provides a window into three family literacy programs that have partnerships with community colleges and are providing transition services for their students. This resource helps program practitioners identify and eliminate obstacles that prevent adult students from continuing their education, including exploring what family literacy programs can do to address the issue of adult students being academically under-prepared for college. It shows how programs can introduce their adult education students to the college environment and continue to provide support as they begin their college experience. Finally, this publication helps programs identify the essential ingredients of a viable family literacy-community college transition partnership.

Tools to prepare parents and children for higher education
Programs already address the academic knowledge parents need for learning English and acquiring the GED credential, but may need help to better outline the cultural and other nonacademic expectations of postsecondary education, such as understanding how the educational system in the United States differs from that of their native country, what education is needed to gain stable employment, the importance of parental involvement in children’s education, and the connection between education and careers for Hispanic students.

That is why NCFL created En camino: Herramientas educativas para familias (On Our Way: Educational Toolkit for Families) available in Spanish and English; www.famlit.org/myfamilygoestocollege. Serving two generations simultaneously, this series of online learning modules addresses the aspirations Latino parents have for their children to attend college. The Toolkit develops the knowledge and abilities that parents need in order to support their children in reaching this goal. This improved understanding of the culture of college may inspire parents to attend college themselves. The Toolkit provides learning activities for adults that promote the pursuit of further education and college completion. It helps parents learn more about their roles of involvement in their children’s schools, focus on setting educational goals, and explore information related to career choices with their children. It fills a significant gap identified by NCFL research, which found few, if any, such existing materials that are available in Spanish. The materials also can be used by families to define their role and the types of support they can provide to ensure their children’s pathway to college.

A Program Instructional Guide, written in English, includes additional activities that both extend and supplement the online resources. These activities are designed to be used with Hispanic students in the Adult Education, Parent Time and Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time® components of a family literacy program. However, the toolkit of resources is flexible and adaptable to other uses by parents and children as stand-alone activities at home, in adult basic education programs, and with schools as they work with parents to involve them in their children’s educational experience. The tools also will be helpful.
for adults who will be the first in their family to attend college.

**Practical steps to develop program-community college partnerships**

To help programs partner with community colleges and help adults progress from family literacy programs to postsecondary education, NCFL has created *Promoting Post-Secondary Educational Success for Adults and Families—A Practical Partnership Guide*. This resource examines what it takes to make a family literacy-community college partnership work, the responsibility of each entity in the partnership, and how to sustain a successful partnership over time.

**CONCLUSION**

Family literacy programs can provide a gateway to postsecondary education. Expanding and promoting these programs will ensure that more Americans obtain a high school diploma or a GED credential, transition to postsecondary education and training, and complete a degree or credential. Because family literacy programs encourage the aspirations and academic achievement of parents and children together, they provide an ideal environment for simultaneously combating our nation’s high school dropout crisis and increasing the number of adults with postsecondary education credentials. In addition, with 73 percent of program students indicating they are of Hispanic/Latino(a) ethnicity, family literacy programs are an efficient and appropriate venue for reaching Hispanic populations.27

Through its research, NCFL identified the key features of programs that are successfully transitioning students to postsecondary education and developed valuable products to help programs address the challenges facing transitioning students. Among its findings, NCFL identified the value of:

- Introducing information about postsecondary education to all students early in the program, even those students whose stated intention is not further education.

- Strengthening existing family literacy-community college partnerships and increasing the number of partnerships that results in greater student success.28

Resources developed by NCFL outline best practices for community colleges and family literacy partnerships, help prepare Hispanic parents and children for higher education, and outline practical steps for community colleges and family literacy programs that wish to develop, or strengthen, transition partnerships.

“Helping more Americans obtain some kind of postsecondary education is the key to our nation’s competitive and economic success.”

As family literacy programs strengthen this role and expand their scope from GED test preparation to moving more students into and supporting them through postsecondary education, additional or reallocated financial resources will be required. Programs would benefit from high quality professional development to prepare staff to add rigor to program curricula, align content with college courses, and assist program coordinators in brokering partnerships with colleges and supportive service providers.

Helping more Americans obtain some kind of postsecondary education is the key to our nation’s competitive and economic success. With a framework already in place, family literacy programs offer an effective, efficient way not only to encourage more adults to enroll in postsecondary education or training, but also to help counteract the myriad problems that cause individuals to drop out before completion of a postsecondary degree or credential. Using family literacy programs as the gateway to postsecondary education benefits not only the individuals in the programs, but also entire families, by helping them to increase income, see the value of and reap the benefits of higher education, and ultimately reach their dreams.


7. Ibid.


9. Ibid.


14. U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008 American Community Survey, 3-year Estimates. Table C15002I. “Sex by Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over (Hispanic or Latino), ” and Table C15002H. “Sex by Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Over (White Alone, not Hispanic or Latino).

15. Ibid.


21. National Center for Family Literacy and MetLife Foundation.


26. Ibid.


28. Ibid.