



Free College Tuition Programs for Adults

Executive Summary



About the Project

The rising cost of college and the growing need for postsecondary education and training has generated great interest in free college tuition programs. Yet many of these programs aim to serve recent high school graduates and little is known about the programs open to adults. To fill this knowledge gap, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), under a grant from Walmart, conducted a scan of free college tuition program websites in spring 2021. The research identified not only adult-eligible programs but also a subset of programs with features that make them adult friendly.

This report captures the findings from this scan and concludes with considerations for practitioners and policymakers as well as research needs for advancing the field. The project's [website](#) includes an interactive map, a downloadable database of programs, and a webinar that explores how free college tuition programs for adults might better leverage employers in establishing and growing programs.

NUMBERS AND LOCATIONS OF ADULT-ELIGIBLE PROGRAMS

During the 2020–21 academic year,

67

adult-eligible programs were active.

22

states plus the District of Columbia had at least one adult-eligible program within their borders.

15

programs were statewide programs.

4

programs were open to adults exclusively.

NUMBER OF ADULT-FRIENDLY PROGRAMS

30

programs allowed participants to have prior postsecondary experience.

18

programs allowed participants to enroll part time.



PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

SIXTY-THREE PROGRAMS required that participants apply for financial aid. This fact is not surprising because **64 programs were last-dollar programs** that covered remaining tuition costs after financial aid was applied.

EIGHTEEN PROGRAMS required participants to **demonstrate financial need**. Adult-friendly programs were more likely to have financial need requirements.

FIVE PROGRAMS had **postgraduation residency and/or work requirements**. Failing to meet these requirements could result in the conversion of participants' financial awards (i.e., grants that covered remaining tuition costs) into loans.

NINE PROGRAMS required that participants **pursue a program of study often identified as high need or high demand** in the labor market. Adult-friendly programs were more likely to have such a requirement.

Most programs were offered at community colleges, with **57 PROGRAMS** including at least one public 2-year college. **Eighteen programs** allowed participants to enroll at a public 4-year college.