DQC **Data Quality Campaign**

Adult Learners Deserve Meaningful Access to Data

> When adult learners have access to data about education and workforce pathways, they will be empowered with the tools they need to make informed choices about their futures and find support in navigating their path forward.

Career pathways are rarely a linear journey. After entering the workforce, adults may return to postsecondary education to reskill, upskill, or switch careers. Unfortunately, accessing information that can help them determine and evaluate their options to find high-quality careers is often difficult for adult learners. Further, adult learners often have additional family responsibilities or work obligations, or they may face financial barriers like affording the cost of tuition while paying for child care.

As adult learners navigate their paths forward, they need to answer important questions: Which career options are best, based on my personal skills and interests? What kinds of high-quality careers are available, and which postsecondary programs provide the required qualifications? Where can I find local programs, what do they cost, and what have the past outcomes been for students like me? Are there social assistance programs that will enable me to cover my expenses and support my family when I go back to school? Answering these questions does not need to be difficult.

Meaningful access to data for adult learners is possible, but it will require state leaders to change existing data systems and develop the tools and resources adult learners need.

Most states have a powerful tool that *could* answer adult learners' questions but doesn't yet. For decades, states have invested in statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) that connect individual-level data over time from early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce data systems. However, the inclusion of postsecondary and workforce data in these SLDSs has lagged. Even in states that do have information about postsecondary education and career pathways that could help adults answer their questions, that data is often hard to find, static, outdated, or presented in a way that is not meaningful to the average data user.

The Data Quality Campaign's (DQC) new vision provides a roadmap for state leaders to transform SLDSs so that they enable the kinds of access to information that adult learners need to understand and make decisions about their education and workforce options.

Who is an adult learner?

DQC defines "adult learners" as students age 25 and older. This definition captures a diverse group of students whose life circumstances—which can include having dependents, working full time, or not having a high school diploma—may pose additional challenges to meeting their education objectives. Adult learners can have a wide range of goals: they may be first-time postsecondary students, graduates returning for more education, job seekers looking to reskill for a new career path, or employed workers looking to improve their skills. Adult learners make up 37 percent of all college students.

Changing SLDSs so they enable access to data will help adult learners:

- Understand the in-demand skills and credentials needed for jobs in the fastest-growing industries in their state;
- Determine how their existing skills would transfer into other positions or careers and what their career options would look like with additional education or certifications;
- Locate nearby counseling and support options to help them chart their paths;
- Locate nearby community college, postsecondary, and other providers of reputable education and career programs and compare the return on investment among various options and their related employment and earnings outcomes;
- Enroll in a program and then identify, determine eligibility for, and enroll in any financial aid or public benefits programs (e.g., nutrition, health care, housing);

What is an SLDS?

Statewide: Connects information from multiple state agencies, including at least early childhood, K–12, postsecondary, and workforce data systems.

Individual level: Includes data that is specific to individual people (may contain identifiable information or be anonymous).

Longitudinal: Captures data from the same population over multiple years.

- Keep track of existing skills, prior learning, and work experience in a standardized way and match those records with local employers and job openings; and
- Identify employment opportunities that are available in their area.

Adult learners have an urgent need for tailored access to information to guide and support decisions about their future.

More robust SLDSs will provide adult learners access to data and tools to help them better understand the job market and pinpoint labor trends and in-demand fields; identify education and employment opportunities nearby; and evaluate those opportunities based on outcomes data from other adult learners with similar characteristics, skills, experience, and education. States must act now to ensure that state data systems meet the needs of adult learners, enabling them to more easily navigate the journey and successfully reach their destination.

Data Checklist

Adult learners should have access to data that is:

- ✔ Specific to questions that adult learners are trying to answer;
- ✔ Timely;
- ✔ Easy to use;
- ✔ Translated into languages other than English;
- ✔ Secure; and
- ✔ Collected over multiple years.

For more on DQC's new vision that provides state leaders with a roadmap to make meaningful access to data a reality for adult learners, visit **www.dataqualitycampaign.org/data-access**.