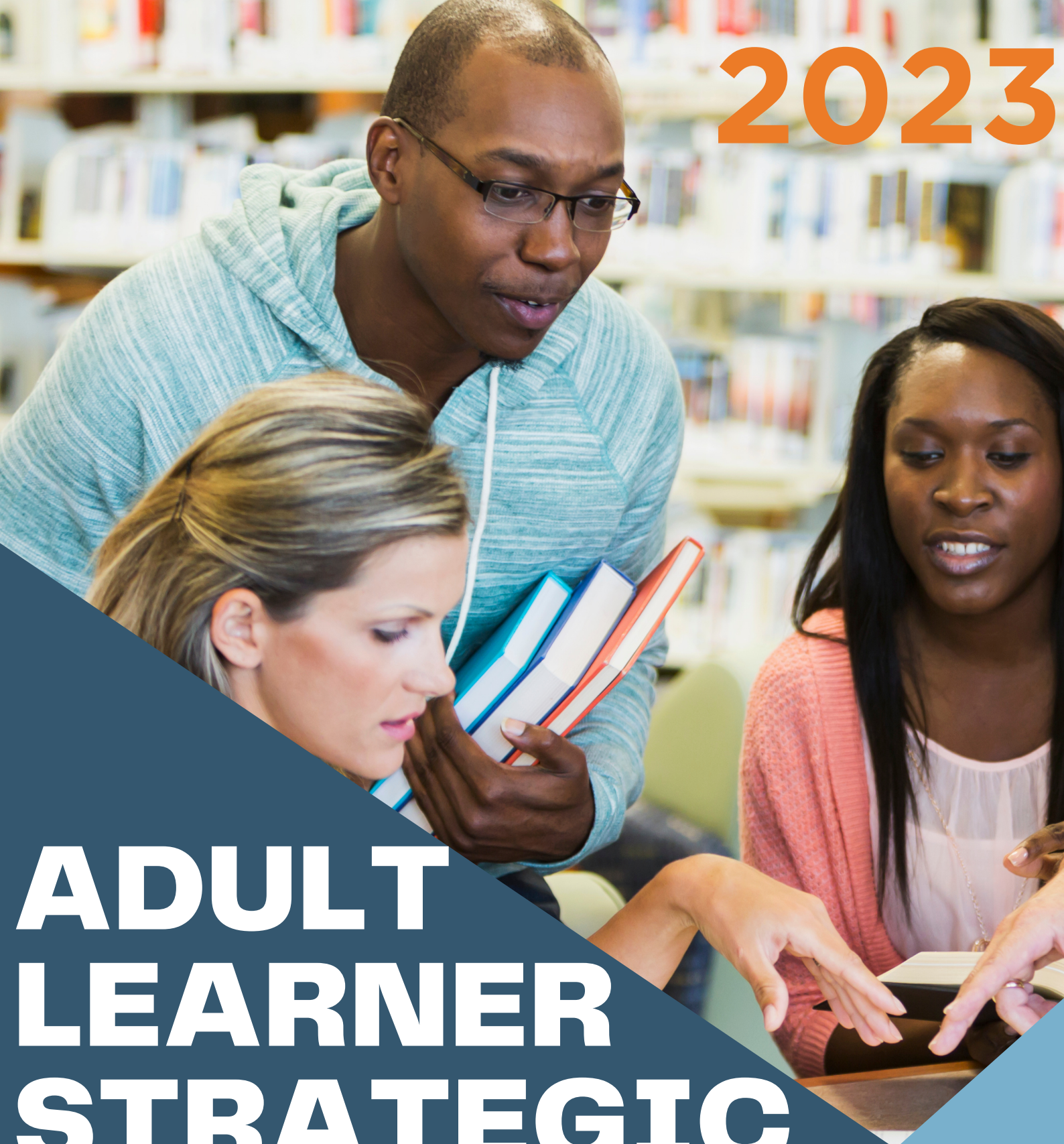


2023



# ADULT LEARNER STRATEGIC PLAN

A ROADMAP TO EQUITABLE POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT FOR ADULT MISSOURIANS

 DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

 ESG

Education Strategy Group

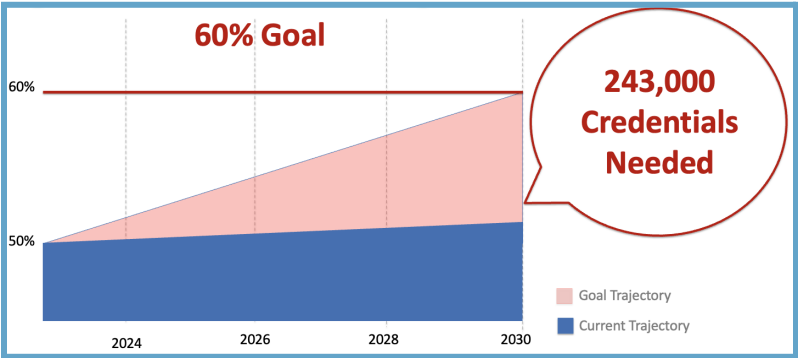
  
**MOCAN**  
MISSOURI COLLEGE & CAREER ATTAINMENT NETWORK

# Executive Summary

Missouri's economic vitality hinges on educational attainment, with 60 percent of jobs requiring education and training above a high school diploma and 20 percent of those jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or higher. Governor Parson, recognizing this vital link between education and prosperity, merged the State higher education and workforce development agencies to establish the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (MDHEWD) in 2019. Today, MDHEWD is united under an ambitious goal to ensure 60% of Missourians ages 25 to 64 attain a postsecondary credential by 2030. Yet this is not simply attainment for attainment's sake. MDHEWD is committed to increasing attainment in fields that will bring the most reliable path to economic mobility for Missourians, while also meeting employers' most pressing talent needs. This will demand strategic and focused investment in what works, and leveraging and scaling the many assets in the State to close existing gaps in postsecondary access and success.

In pursuit of its 60 percent postsecondary attainment goal, MDHEWD has directed its focus towards a key demographic: adult learners aged 25-64 without a postsecondary credential or degree. While traditional-age students in Missouri play a role in the State's attainment goal, their numbers alone are insufficient to achieve this ambitious objective. Further analysis demonstrates a historical underservice to adults aged 25-64 within the Black, Hispanic, and rural demographics, with their postsecondary attainment rates consistently lingering at approximately 28 percent. In contrast, White attainment rates stand at around 43 percent, Asian attainment rates exceed 68 percent, and urban attainment rates are around 44 percent. It is evident that Black, Hispanic, and rural adults face a significant gap and considerable progress is needed to bridge this disparity. To bridge these gaps, MDHEWD has set educational targets for these communities, aiming for 60 percent educational attainment for each group. To navigate this critical mission, MDHEWD collaborated with Education Strategy Group (ESG), tasking them with developing an adult learner strategic plan to dramatically increase the number of 25-64-year-olds with a postsecondary credential. This report not only aims to achieve the State's attainment goal but also integrates specific tactics designed to effectively address equity disparities, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable future for all Missourians.

While significant progress has been made toward Missouri's attainment goal, the latest data projections from MDHEWD indicate that Missouri is set to be approximately 6 percentage points shy of its goal in 2030, equaling a shortfall of 243,000 credentials. Of those 243,000 credentials, it is estimated that only about 100,000 could be





backfilled by interventions targeted at traditional-aged students. This means, to meet the State’s attainment goal, approximately 150,000 credentials must be earned by Missouri adults without a postsecondary credential or degree. Further, to stay on track to meet the State’s equity goal, all 150,000 of those credentials must be earned by Black, Hispanic, and rural Missourians by 2028.

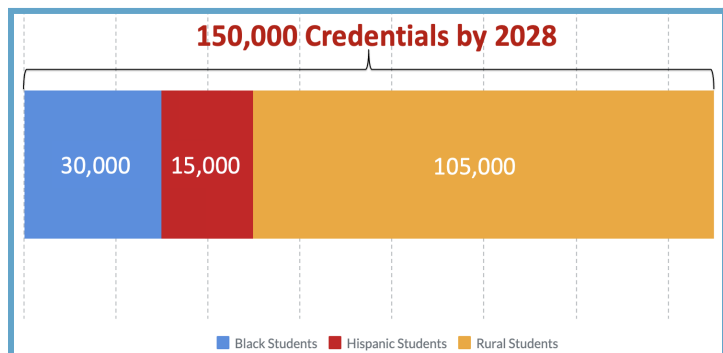
Missouri is well-positioned to achieve this mission, drawing on its rich assets started by the Missouri Adult Learner Network (ALN), Missouri College & Career Attainment Network (MOCAN), and other stakeholders. With collaborative efforts and strategic investments, the State can harness these resources to drive adult learner success. Further, by leveraging the aligned state higher education and workforce agencies, Missouri can build a workforce that meets the demands of a rapidly changing economy while fostering prosperity and opportunity for all its citizens.

This Adult Learner Strategic Plan outlines a targeted approach to use those assets and close the 150,000 credential gap for Black, Hispanic, and rural adults. ESG's approach to crafting this report was rigorous and comprehensive. Through 20 in-depth stakeholder interviews, ESG gathered invaluable insights from a diverse array of perspectives, ensuring a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by Missouri's education system. In addition to these qualitative insights, ESG analyzed data from multiple sources, including many indicators of postsecondary attainment. This data-driven analysis was complemented by postsecondary attainment modeling techniques, allowing ESG to assess the potential impact of various interventions on closing the credential gap.

Moreover, ESG actively sought feedback from a steering committee, enriching the report with expert perspectives and ensuring its alignment with real-world applications. Collaborating closely with the Adult Learner Network, ESG tapped into a wealth of innovative ideas and best practices, infusing the report with practical, actionable strategies.

## Setting our Progress Goal

Missouri's progress goal stands at the intersection of ambition and equity, striving to achieve both the State's 60 percent attainment goal and its 60 percent equity goals for Black, Hispanic, and rural communities. Instead of pursuing a broad increase in credential attainment among all adult Missourians by 150,000 by 2030, the progress goal sharpens its focus. By concentrating efforts on Black, Hispanic, and rural populations, the Progress Goal aims to boost credential attainment by 150,000 individuals by 2028. This strategic shift not only accelerates progress, ensuring the



State is on track to fulfill its overarching 2030 attainment goal but, more importantly, will put the State on track to close the attainment gaps within these historically underserved equity populations by the year 2030.

Reversing decades of historical inequity is extremely challenging; however, if Missouri can increase credential attainment by 150,000 focusing solely on Black, Hispanic, and rural adults, then these populations will see meaningful closures in attainment gaps by 2030. Further, if achieved, the State is certain to not just reach its overall 60 percent goal, but exceed it.

## Focus Areas, Strategies, & Tactics to Deliver 150,000 Credentials

The focus areas, strategies, and tactics for Missouri's adult learner strategic plan were shaped by triangulation of data-driven insights, asset mapping through interviews and convenings, and peer benchmarking and comparisons.

### Improving Postsecondary Access

To meet the 60 percent attainment goal, increasing adult access to postsecondary education must be prioritized, particularly those from underserved communities. Two pivotal takeaways from the evidence underscore the importance of this focus area. **First, to realize Missouri's adult postsecondary attainment goal and close equity gaps, it is imperative to expand enrollment among the targeted equity subpopulations.** There are simply too few Black, Hispanic, and rural adult students currently enrolled in postsecondary education and training to meet Missouri's attainment or equity goal. Of the universe of potential adult Black, Hispanic, and rural students in Missouri, less than 1 percent are enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Even slight increases in enrollment for any of these subpopulations will yield a large increase in attainment and closing of equity gaps. This is particularly true for rural populations.

To dramatically expand the number of Black, Hispanic, and rural students enrolled in postsecondary, Missouri should:

1. **Unlock Aid for Postsecondary Education:** Securing financial aid is pivotal for adult learners aiming to access postsecondary education. Missouri's flagship grant program for adults, Fast Track, remains underutilized, highlighting the need for more comprehensive marketing. Additionally, federal initiatives like Ability to Benefit and SNAP E&T are not fully utilized, presenting untapped financial resources for aspiring learners and institutions. Moreover, barriers faced by justice-impacted learners in receiving state aid persist, and with the restoration of Federal Pell Grants, these obstacles may further impede access rather than expand it. To address these challenges, efforts must focus on unlocking aid for postsecondary education. Streamlining financial aid processes and enhancing resource accessibility for aspiring learners are essential steps. Simplifying application procedures and raising awareness about available aid options are crucial measures that empower aspiring students to pursue higher education without overwhelming financial constraints.

Tactics to Unlock Aid for Postsecondary Education	Priority Level
Tactic 1: Rebrand and Monitor Fast Track	Short-Term
Tactic 2: Reform Policies that Create Barriers to Granting State Financial Aid to Justice-Impacted Learners	Short-Term
Tactic 3: Leverage Fast Track to Increase Ability to Benefit Usage	Medium-Term
Tactic 4: Designate All Community Colleges as SNAP E&T Providers	Medium Term

2. *Make Navigating the System Possible:* The complexities of the college application process pose significant challenges, particularly for adult learners. While Missouri has taken a step forward with the launch of an \$8.5 million Postsecondary Advising Initiative to aid traditional-age students, adults—many of whom require distinct and tailored advising—are often left to navigate the system on their own. Recognizing this gap, there is a pressing need for improved navigation support for adult learners. To address this issue, it is crucial to make navigating the educational system feasible for adults. This can be achieved by simplifying information and personalizing guidance to make the process more manageable and less daunting.

Tactics to Make Navigating the System Possible	Priority Level
Tactic 5: Integrate Adult-Specific Information and Planning Resources in Journey to College	Medium-Term
Tactic 6: Hire Adult-Focused Navigators To Provide Support To Adult Students	Medium-Term

3. *Create an Adult College-Going Culture:* In a rapidly evolving economy, communicating the intrinsic value of higher educational attainment is paramount, especially concerning its direct impact on job prospects and career trajectories. The economic landscape is shifting dramatically, even in traditionally non-credential-focused sectors like agriculture, where technological innovations are driving transformative changes. These innovations necessitate a workforce equipped with advanced knowledge and skills, highlighting the crucial role of higher education. To address this, it is imperative to cultivate an environment that actively encourages and supports adult learners in their pursuit of higher education through consistent messaging of the State’s goal and direct outreach to target equity populations.

Tactics to Create an Adult College-Going Culture	Priority Level
Tactic 7: Communicate the Postsecondary Goal and Equity Targets	Short-Term
Tactic 8: Convene Equity Population Summits	Short-Term

Second, the substantial 'some college, no degree' (SCND) population in Missouri demands proactive attention and tailored interventions. With over 600,000 individuals falling into the SCND category and approximately 117,000 potential completers—students possessing the necessary credits for a postsecondary credential but lacking the awarded degree—Missouri possesses a substantial pool of former students capable of making significant contributions toward achieving the educational goal.

To engage this large population of Missourians, Missouri should:

1. *Identify and Re-engage Some College No Degree:* Missouri stands poised to capitalize on the groundwork laid by initiatives like Degrees When Due. By leveraging these efforts, the State can effectively identify all 'some college, no degree' (SCND) students and specifically concentrate on potential completers who possess credits for a postsecondary credential. Currently, several education technology companies are assisting states and institutions in identifying these potential completers and implementing tailored interventions to facilitate their degree completion journey.

Tactics to Identify and Re-Engage Some College No Degree	Priority Level
Tactic 9: Use Tech-Enabled Solutions to Identify and Re-Engage Some College No Degree Populations	Short-Term

### Improving Postsecondary Completion

Improving postsecondary completion is a fundamental objective, aiming to enhance student retention, persistence, and graduation rates within postsecondary institutions. Three critical takeaways underscore the imperative to create supportive educational environments tailored to the diverse needs of adult learners, addressing their basic, emotional, and academic requirements. According to MDHEWD data, adults attending both two-year and four-year institutions exhibit lower completion rates compared to their traditional age counterparts. At 2-year institutions, traditional-age students achieve a completion rate of 33%, while only 26% of adults manage to complete. Likewise, in four-year institutions, 64% of traditional-age students complete their programs, while only 25% of adults reach completion.

The completion gap between adult learners and traditional-age students necessitates the creation of supportive educational environments that meet the basic, emotional, and academic needs of adult learners.

To close the completion gap between adult learners and traditional-aged learners, Missouri should:

1. *Support Students' Basic Needs:* Insights gleaned from interviews with postsecondary stakeholders underscored challenges faced by adult students, where issues like childcare, food and housing insecurity, transportation, and broadband access emerged as recurrent concerns. Recognizing the critical nature of these challenges, student basic needs must be addressed. Leveraging federal funding like SNAP, CCAMPIS, and Head Start are possible avenues to meet adult students' basic needs.

Tactics to Support Students' Basic Needs	Priority Level
Tactic 10: Braid SNAP Funding to Launch Single Stops	Long-Term
Tactic 11: Co-locate Child Care Centers on College Campuses	Long-Term

2. *Build Supportive Adult Campuses:* The momentum generated by Complete College America around proactive advising catalyzes transformative change in Missouri's educational landscape. However, in interviews and conversations with the Steering Committee and the ALN, not all postsecondary institutions have transformed at the same pace. Further momentum is required to ensure all institutions are implementing proactive advising with fidelity. Additionally, insightful stakeholder interviews highlighted the innovative efforts undertaken by numerous institutions in Missouri, particularly in the realm of flexible scheduling. By strengthening these academic support services and building schedules that work for adults, adult students will receive the essential guidance required for their successful academic journey and be in a place that recognizes their demanding lives.

Tactics to Build Supportive Adult Campuses	Priority Level
Tactic 12: Uplift Institutions Experimenting with Flexible Schedules	Short-Term
Tactic 13: Fund a Competitive Grant around the Adoption and Implementation of Proactive Advising	Medium-Term

In 2016, the Missouri Legislature approved the 15 to Finish Act, acknowledging that fewer than half of Missouri students complete 15 credit hours per semester, posing challenges for on-time graduation. This is particularly challenging for adult students, balancing their busy lives with educational pursuits. However, creative program structures, the elimination of burdensome remedial coursework, and the recognition of nontraditional forms of learning can facilitate a faster progression for adult learners along their educational pathways. These initiatives aim to address the unique circumstances faced by adult students, promoting efficiency and success in their educational endeavors. **To empower adult learners and foster their success, the development of accelerated programs designed to meet their unique needs is imperative.**

To shorten the time to completion for adult learners, Missouri should:

1. *Accelerate Educational Journeys:* Several stakeholders underscored the paramount importance of Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) for adult learners. Additionally, Missouri has come a long way around remedial coursework. However, like proactive advising, advances from Complete College America around remediation vary across institutions. Building upon these two areas, the State can decrease time-to-degree for adults and transition them into the workforce.

Tactics to Accelerate Educational Journeys	Priority Level
Tactic 14: Convene a Community of Practice around Credit for Prior Learning for Apprenticeships	Short-Term
Tactic 15: Scale Co-requisite Courses Across Institutions	Medium-Term

While CORE 42 holds promise in theory, its practical implementation has revealed challenges, with institutions sometimes not recognizing students' credits. Additionally, the State has launched a reverse transfer task force. Postsecondary leader interviews have illuminated a crucial need for enhanced transparency in student transfers. Postsecondary leaders expressed a desire for detailed information on their students' transfer destinations. From a data-informed decision-making perspective, ESG emphasizes the importance of disaggregated data, particularly in terms of age, race, and geography. **Focusing on 2-4-year transfers and reverse transfer is essential for Missouri to align educational pathways, increase degree attainment, and create a more efficient and effective higher education system.**



To increase traditional and reverse transfers, Missouri should:

1. *Systematize Transfers*: Recognizing the vital role of clear and efficient procedures in student transfers between educational institutions, simplifying transfers, and ensuring seamless transitions is paramount.

Tactics to Systematize Transfers	Priority Level
Tactic 16: Make Opting-out of Reverse Transfer The Default	Short-Term
Tactic 17: Deliver Comprehensive Institutional and Student Guidance for CORE 42	Medium-Term
Tactic 18: Publish Transfer Data Disaggregated by Equity Population Demographics	Medium-Term

By focusing on essential needs, accelerating educational pathways, and streamlining transfer processes, the State can create a practical and efficient higher education system. Through transparent and data-driven strategies, Missouri can work to bridge the completion gap between adult and traditional-age students, fostering a supportive environment where learners can succeed. These strategies reflect a pragmatic and results-oriented approach to improving postsecondary completion and addressing the challenges faced by adult learners.

### Improving Workforce Alignment

In the pursuit of refining workforce alignment, Missouri places significant emphasis on the role of the merged Higher Education and Workforce Development Department. **Conversations with postsecondary leaders across Missouri identified the merger of the Higher Education and Workforce Development Department as a crucial asset for the State.** Recognizing the importance of the merger, the strategies leverage its potential, ensuring optimal integration and enhancing work-based learning initiatives.

To maximize MDHEWD’s integration, Missouri should:

1. *Build on the State’s Work-Based Learning Success*: Missouri ranks third for registered apprenticeships, fourth for active apprenticeships, and fourth for completed apprenticeships. However, adults generally and Black, Hispanic, and rural populations, more importantly, are underserved in apprenticeships. Expanding upon proven work-based learning initiatives is vital, as it equips adults with practical experiences, enabling them to refine their skills and seamlessly transition into the workforce. By scaling these successful programs, Missouri not only enriches adult educational experiences but also nurtures partnerships between educational

institutions and employers, fostering a symbiotic relationship that aligns academic learning with industry demands.

Tactics to Build on the State's Work-Based Learning Success	Priority Level
Tactic 19: Actively Recruit Priority Populations into Apprenticeships	Medium-Term
Tactic 20: Expand A Successful Regional Workforce Model to a Statewide Initiative	Medium-Term
Tactic 21: Facilitate the Establishment of Integrated Education and Training (IET) Programs	Long-Term

- Maximizing Departmental Integration:* The union of the Higher Education Office and Workforce Development opens doors to synergistic opportunities, particularly in the realm of integrated education and technology (IET) programs and new apprenticeships. By harnessing Workforce Development's extensive employer connections and the Higher Education Office's rich network within postsecondary institutions, we can create a seamless integration model. This strategic partnership ensures that efforts are harmonized and streamlined, enhancing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of launching innovative programs. Through this collaborative approach, Missouri aims to maximize the impact of both departments, fostering a cohesive environment where Higher Ed and industry collaborate effortlessly.

Tactics for Maximizing Departmental Integration	Priority Level
Tactic 22: Equip the MDHEWD's Front-line Staff with Workforce and Postsecondary Advising Professional Development	Short-Term
Tactic 23: Harness MDHEWD's Employer and Postsecondary Relationships to Establish Work-Based Learning Partnerships	Short-Term

Missouri's strategic focus on strengthening the MDHEWD role underscores the State's commitment to bridging the gap between education and employment. By building upon successful work-based learning experiences and maximizing departmental integration, Missouri is poised to cultivate a workforce that not only possesses academic knowledge but also embodies the practical skills essential for thriving in the modern professional landscape.

## Conclusion

The strategies and tactics outlined in this report aim to increase postsecondary enrollment, facilitate credential attainment, and enhance workforce competitiveness in Missouri's knowledge-driven economy. By addressing gaps in postsecondary attainment and driving focused action, the Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development can guide the state toward policies and practices that significantly benefit all learners. This report offers a timely framework to strengthen the impact of Missouri's educational initiatives, aligning with our long-term state objectives, economic growth, and prosperity goals.