



555 West Washington Ave, Suite 200
Madison, WI 53703

www.wccf.org
☎ 608-284-0580
✉ 608-284-0583

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Contact: John Keckhaver, (608) 284-0580 ext. 305
Bob Jacobson, (608) 284-0580, ext. 303

Nontraditional Students Falling Through Cracks in Financial Aid System

New Issue Brief Finds Lack of Support for Working Adults Seeking Postsecondary Education

(Madison) – A new report from the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families explores the disconnect between the state’s current financial aid tools—focused primarily on traditional students coming out of high school—and the evolving needs of working adults and employers. “Willing and Able, But Not Eligible” describes a situation in which workers need more advanced skills and better credentials than in the past to command family-supporting wages, but are unable to access the state’s primary need-based financial aid tools. Meanwhile, Wisconsin businesses continue to face a shortage of workers who possess precisely the kinds of skills these adults seek to acquire.

“It’s time to update our approach to financial aid in a way that will benefit both working families and employers,” said WCCF Policy Analyst John Keckhaver. “It no longer makes sense to focus solely on 18-year-olds who can devote all or most of their time to their studies. Adult workers returning to the classroom are an important asset to Wisconsin’s economy, and we need to invest in them.”

Most adults who study must fit their school schedules around jobs and family obligations. As a result, they are often unable to enroll for the number of class hours required to be eligible for financial aid. And for many that are working full time, their incomes often disqualify them for need-based tuition assistance. The report highlights steps taken in other states meant to address these same problems.

The brief recommends that we implement new financial aid tools modeled on a successful program in the state of Washington, which provides financial aid to otherwise ineligible students seeking technical college training for critical, high-demand occupations. A similar idea was the Opportunity Grants included in Gov. Doyle’s *Grow Wisconsin* economic development plan. The report also recommends examining the costs and benefits of revising the state’s existing financial aid tools; for example, removing the “at least half-time” requirement for Wisconsin Higher Education Grants, raising the financial aid income limit, and expanding the list of expenses used to calculate student need.

“We’re in a very competitive race to match worker skills and credentials with employer needs,” according to Keckhaver. “We can’t sit still for very long without further risking the economic security of our families and our economy.”

“Willing and Able, But Not Eligible” is available online at http://wccf.org/pdf/willing_able_not_eligible.pdf.