

## FOCUSING HELP ON SCNC STUDENTS

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Some college, no credential: Read those words aloud and consider their impact for the 40 million people in the U.S. whom they describe. Paying tuition and carrying student loan debt is supposed to be a reasonable tradeoff for future career prospects — but earning college credits without completing a degree is a burden with no reward.

Those who teach at the high school or college level can undoubtedly cite examples of why students stop out: family responsibilities, illness, costs. Rarely are these problems academic in nature, because even high-achieving students are vulnerable to financial or personal pressures that originate outside the classroom.

If colleges and universities want to be stewards for economic mobility and personal growth, expanding programs and support for SCNC (some college, no credential) individuals could unlock an important door to academic progress in our nation.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning advocates a range of solutions. Short-term programs can be designed to award certificates or other credentials that are more focused than a two- or four-year degree. Supporting students toward the completion of microcredentials or stackable credentials means developing shorter-term programs that teach and document specific skills or knowledge. Recognizing students for what they know and can do builds a sense of purpose at the time of learning, and shorter-term credentials are more portable if a student needs to stop out before completion of a traditional degree.

Alternatively, prior learning assessment can confer academic credit for skills and knowledge gained in the workplace or other settings. Several universities, including my own, offer at least one pathway for non-traditional-age students or those returning after a multiyear gap to earn academic credit by presenting evidence and reflecting on their learning outside of a traditional classroom. One of my recent students, for example, documented her decade as a police sergeant, followed by a decade as a middle school classroom aide, and wrote an essay about how the knowledge she earned in those roles mapped onto university courses in criminology, psychology, education, and communication. Upon

completion of her bachelor's degree, she proudly crossed the stage at graduation and was embraced by her teenage twin daughters — truly a memorable moment.

At a time when colleges are approaching the demographic cliff that marks a decrease in the number of 18-year-olds in the United States (a result of lower birth rates during and after the 2008 recession), turning our attention to the growing number of SCNC individuals could be a win-win solution. Universities would shore up their enrollment numbers and continue to support the entire range of their academic offerings, and students returning to college would at last earn credentials that can increase their earning power in the workplace.



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