

## Op-Ed

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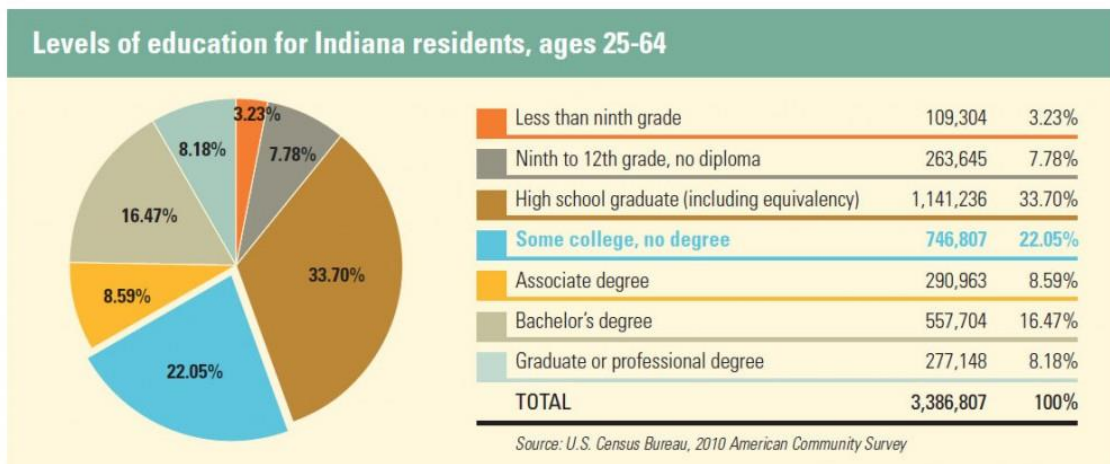
### “Completing Degree As Working Adult Has Merit”

Education Matters: Returning to Complete a College Degree as a Working Adult  
Dr. Matt Bergman

Believe it or not, there are over 40,000 residents in five Southern Indiana Counties with some college and no degree (Harrison, Floyd, Washington, Clark, and Scott). Whether it was work commitments, family priorities, or significant life events; life throws *competing responsibilities* into play that often derail our community members from finishing the degrees that they started last year or long ago. Fortunately, there are flexible and convenient options all over the region to serve those individuals that want to fulfill a long held goal, advance in the workplace, inspire their children, change careers, or all of the above.

Education Matters Southern Indiana is engaged in a regional commitment to economic development, workforce talent advancement, and strengthened communities. Led by each county’s Community Foundation, this initiative is designed to promote policies within higher education, employers, and private and public funding sources that benefit adult students. These dedicated community foundation leaders are here to demonstrate, develop, and promote practices that promote adult college completion.

Research shows that in our five county region, only 25% of the workforce has an associate’s, bachelor’s, or professional degree, compared to 38% nationally. Yet one in four – over 40,000 people – of the region’s adult workers has earned some college credits. If you are a member of this 40,000, your attainment of a college degree represents an opportunity to increase the economic development of our communities, lure new businesses to our region, and enhance the quality of life for this and future generations.



Graphic by the Lumina Foundation

Of course, there is no perfect time to take on yet another responsibility in life. However, an investment in education is an investment in your future. Consider the quality of life benefits that often accompany attainment of a college degree. There are evening, online, weekend, and even competency based programs that can provide students with a fast path to graduation. Also, colleges in our region are offering Prior Learning Assessment, which grants college credit for workplace learning and experience. If you have technical training, military experience, continuing education credits, or any number of professional development experiences from your past or previous work, it can translate directly into college credits toward your degree.

So, how do you get started? Education Matters Southern Indiana has a mission to **strengthen our workforce** and **improve the economic advantages** of our region by increasing the educational attainment of adults with some post-secondary education but no degree or certification. Below are the top six tips on how to get started on your journey to finish your degree.

#### Top SIX Essential Tips on How to Choose the Best Adult Friendly Degree Program

1. **Reflect and Research:** What do you plan to do in your career, what skills and credentials are required? Once you know the answers to these questions, you can narrow the search and examine schools that offer the program that is right for you.
2. **Find the appropriate delivery method for your needs:** Decide what type of classes (online, face-to-face, blended) you want to take. Explore the times and days that courses are offered and choose a program that offers classes that work with your schedule. Check to see if there are accelerated course options (5-8 week classes) if that is a desirable option for your schedule.
3. **Regional Accreditation:** Most programs will have the important designation of being Regionally Accredited. However, it is very important to make sure your degree will be valued and credits will transfer in the event that you want to switch schools or advance from a two-year to a four-year college.
4. **Create a “Top Picks” list:** Once you have some Regionally Accredited options that match your interests, contact the institutions to make a virtual or in-person appointment. See if the institution has the type of people that seem welcoming and committed to your goal fulfillment. Talk with some staff, faculty, and students to get a sense of the campus culture. Is the atmosphere inclusive and considerate of your schedule? If not, consider expanding your search.
5. **Financial Aid and Cost:** Are there options for financial assistance through loans, grants, or scholarships? Having some financial assistance is a positive predictor of student persistence. Consider the price of the institution and make sure the investment matches the investment you are making. Don't forget the cost of any fees, books, or other costs. If you feel comfortable with the investment you are about to make, you will be more likely to persist to graduation or certificate completion.
6. **Confirm your Support Team:** To go back to school is no easy feat. To be successful, research suggests that a support network that can help you manage the wide-ranging tasks of adult life is essential. Find childcare options within

your family or at the university or college. Talk to your significant other to develop a game plan of how to meet all of the household and family tasks. Develop the support team that is your sounding board for tough times and for help with that challenging term paper. Lastly, set expectations with your loved ones about the support, patience, and care that you will require as you return to complete your degree.

If we believe the children are our future, then adults are our “present.” It is time to take care of ourselves and establish a better quality of life by seeking the education that gives us the opportunities we deserve in the work place. Educational attainment is certainly not an easy step but it is often necessary to help us reach our full potential and get noticed for those jobs that we dream of having in our lifetimes.

Do this for yourself, do this for your family, but no matter what go finish your degree if you believe it is a pathway to a better life. The short-term sacrifice will pay long-term dividends.

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