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First-Ever California Working Learner Week Shines Spotlight on Millions of Californians Balancing Work, Learning and Life

New statewide focus elevates working learners as essential to California's workforce, communities and economic future

OAKLAND, Calif. (Oct. 5, 2026) – California cannot reach its education, workforce or economic goals without working learners.

Six million working-age Californians have some college experience but no degree, and millions more have no postsecondary credential of any kind. Together, they represent both an enormous pool of talent and an extraordinary opportunity to fuel California's future prosperity.

That opportunity is the focus of the first-ever California Working Learner Week from Oct. 5-9 hosted by College Futures Foundation (College Futures) to elevate the experiences, priorities and aspirations of working learners and spur meaningful action across education, workforce, employer and policy sectors.

Working learners are people pursuing education and training after high school while also working and balancing family, caregiving, financial or other responsibilities. They are today's learners, yet much of the postsecondary system was designed generations ago around a very different student experience.

"California's path to greater prosperity runs directly through working learners," said Eloy Ortiz Oakley, President and CEO of College Futures. "Millions of Californians are already working and contributing to their communities. When we remove the barriers that keep them from gaining new skills and earning credentials and degrees of value, we create exponential opportunity that extends from individuals and families to employers, communities and the entire California economy."

Research on working learners, including both quantitative findings and firsthand accounts, points clearly to what they need to succeed. Flexibility is fundamental. Learners report that they want and need education and training opportunities that reflect the realities of their lives, recognize the demands on their time and provide clear pathways to credentials that lead to greater economic opportunity.

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Their experiences also show where change is needed. Working learners can help educators, employers and policymakers identify where existing pathways are working, where barriers remain and how California can make it easier for people to access education and complete credentials and degrees while continuing to work.

The potential payoff is enormous.

The *Golden Ticket* research examining the economic impact of increasing postsecondary attainment estimates that California could generate $4.4 trillion in economic gains over 50 years if 70% of Californians across demographic groups earn a postsecondary credential or degree. The research by Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce and College Futures found that working learners account for more than half of that potential gain, approximately $2.4 trillion.

The research underscores a powerful opportunity for California: help more adults already in the workforce earn credentials of value and the benefits and gains multiply. Importantly, those gains do not depend on a single educational pathway. Certificates, industry-recognized credentials, degrees and other credentials of value can all help working Californians build skills, advance in their careers and contribute more fully to the state's economy.

"California has tremendous talent already in its workforce, but working learners are not presented with what they need to participate," Oakley said. "The opportunity before us is to create more ways for people to build on that talent throughout their lives. That means greater flexibility and stronger connections among education, employers and the workforce system."

Employers have an important stake in that work. As industries confront changing skill needs, emerging technologies and workforce shortages, supporting employees as they upskill, reskill and earn credentials can help businesses develop and retain talent while creating greater opportunities for workers to advance.

California Working Learner Week brings those interests together, giving employers, educators, policymakers, workforce leaders and community partners a shared moment to focus on working learners and the pathways that can help them succeed.

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California Working Learner Week activities launch on Oct. 5:

- College Future's Eloy Ortiz Oakley delivering a statewide *2026 State of California Learners Address*.
    - LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/event/manage/7501741132259725312/
    - YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/live/VsqU3cjvPyU
- Daily release of compelling California adult learner stories via College Futures' website and social media platforms and via key partners
- Employer and partner engagement
- The release and examination of new quantitative and qualitative research Oct. 5 and Oct. 8 from Gallup and Ideas42.

California Working Learner Week puts a spotlight on a population that will be critical to the state's next chapter of economic growth — and on the opportunity to build a California where millions more people can continue working, keep learning and move forward.

For more information about California Working Learner Week, visit www.californiaworkinglearnerweek.org.

Contact:
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About College Futures Foundation

At College Futures Foundation, we believe in the power of postsecondary opportunity. We believe that securing the postsecondary success of students facing the most formidable barriers will ensure that all of us can thrive—our communities, our economy, and our state. We believe that the equitable education system of the future, one that enables every learner to achieve their dreams and participate in an inclusive and robust economy, will be realized if we are focused, determined, and active in our leadership and partnership.