

DATA THAT MOVE US

The Graduate! Network



THE COMEBACKER'S ODYSSEY

The Journey to Degree Completion

August 2021

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Special Thanks to Our Funder & Research Communities

The Comebacker's Odyssey was completed with funding support from the [Ascendium Education Group](#).

Our research is based on those sites that have a common core: institution-neutral navigation; services to adult learners; some aspect of practice that is focused on degree completion; and aligned service flow and data collection practices. These communities include: [College Now Greater Cleveland](#) (Cleveland, OH), [Detroit Drives Degrees](#) (Detroit, MI), [Graduate! Philadelphia](#) (Philadelphia, PA), [Greater Minds Spokane](#) (Spokane, WA), [KC Degrees](#) (Kansas City, MO), [Mission Graduate](#) (Albuquerque, NM), [Education 2 Employment Partners](#) (Corpus Christi, TX) and [Upgrade](#) (San Antonio, TX). We are grateful to them for sharing their Comebacker data with us, and without them this report and our *Data That Move Us* work would not be possible.

For a full list of communities, States, organizations, and institutions that have engaged with the Network in support of educational access, equity, and completion for Comebackers, we invite you to view our [map](#).

The Unfinished Work of Education Attainment

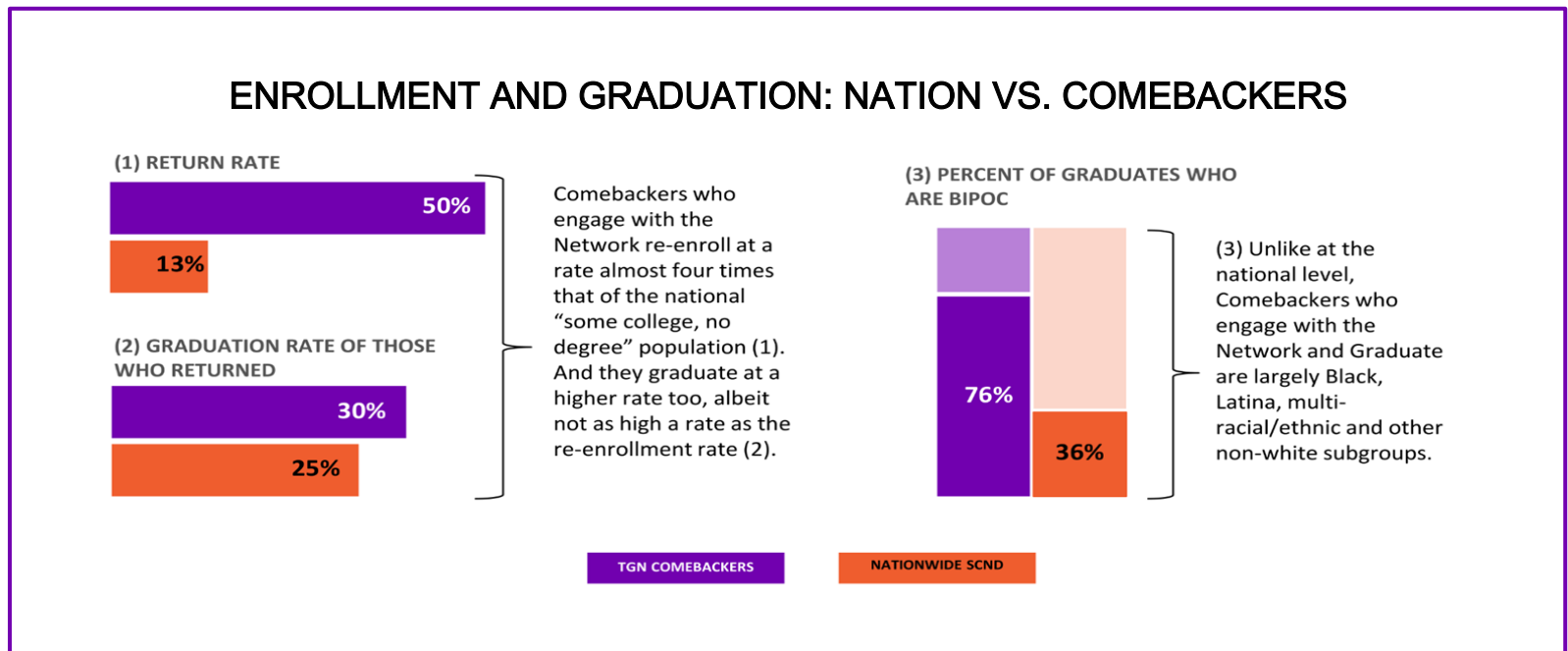
- Over the past three decades, US college education attainment has increased from 20 to 38 percent
- But this success story masks educational inequities, which are largely along racial lines
- The hidden narrative behind these inequities: the US adult population that has earned some college but no degree, which remains persistently large
- Racial gaps in education attainment at this scale cannot be reasonably attributed to personal shortcomings and individual failures
- Rather, it is our failure as a nation to view higher education equity as an imperative

“GRIT” IS NOT A POLICY SOLUTION

The Graduate! Network: A Mission of Education Equity, A High-Quality Contact Model

Comebackers who engage with the Network **re-enroll at a rate almost four times** that of the national “some college, no degree” population (1). And they **graduate at a higher rate too**, albeit not at as high a rate as the re-enrollment rate (2).

(3) Unlike at the national level, Comebackers who engage with the Network *and* graduate are **largely Black, Latina, multi-racial/ethnic, and other non-white subgroups**.



The Comebacker's Odyssey



Affording a college degree
Navigating mid-journey changes
Persevering as a returning student

Challenge 1: Affording a College Degree

The Known

- Weighed down by existing student loan debt
- Trapped by institutional debt

The Revelation

- Starting at the back of the pack
- The deceptive lure of Pell Grants
- Financial aid pitfalls

Challenge 2: Navigating Mid-Journey Changes

The Known

- Making changes in school and field of study: normal, healthy and expected
- Except for certain populations

The Revelation

- Why Comebackers make changes
- Setbacks from credit loss
- Missed opportunities for Prior Learning Assessment

Challenge 3: Persevering as a Returning Adult Student

The Known

- The learning orientation of adults
- Discerning institutional metrics

The Revelation

- Navigating academic bumps in the road
- Making sense of non-degree credentials

Immediate Priorities for Action

#1 Revamp the Pell Grant Program

#2 Eliminate debt traps

#3 Increase the use of employer-offered tuition assistance programs

Promising Programs, Policies & Practices of Higher Education Partners

Welcome Comebackers

- Reach out to those with some college but no degree
- Create special admissions programs

Optimize credit and degree awarding for Comebackers

- Provide advisors trained in awarding transfer credit
- Offer Prior Learning Assessment
- Embed credentials into degree pathways

Invest in Comebackers

- Award more scholarships and grants
- Distribute emergency and micro grants
- Help with non-tuition costs

Cultivate a supportive campus for Comebackers

- Tailor offerings
- Offer degree completion programs
- Provide supportive services
- Make advising “intrusive”

The Network's Commitment

For the community of Comebackers, and because we have a responsibility to work toward justice, we pledge the following:

- To do all within our power to ensure Comebackers have supports so that the inequities they confront do not derail their educational goals.
- To work tirelessly to ensure practitioners have the knowledge and tools available to them to support the Comebackers they serve all the way to their goals, fully recognizing that every person who has the courage to seek assistance on their educational journey has a unique set of gifts, aspirations, and experiences.
- To never lose sight of the reality that long-term educational equity requires fundamental system change; we will continuously and loudly name inequities, share our learning broadly, and elevate the voices of Comebackers to guide us toward a more just and equitable future.