

Ability to Benefit Survey Results

In December 2014, section 484(d) of the Higher Education Act of 1965, was changed to allow a student who does not have a high school diploma (or its recognized equivalent), to be eligible for Title IV student assistance (financial aid) through one of the ability to benefit (ATB) alternatives, but only if the student is enrolled in an "eligible career pathway program." While guidance was released the subsequent year (GEN-15-09, [revised GEN-16-09](#)), ambiguity about ATB processes still exist.

In February 2019, the Illinois Community College Board disseminated a survey to the community colleges in Illinois to 1) understand if and how community colleges were utilizing Ability to Benefit (ATB) and 2) understand the challenges faced in the implementation or scale of ATB. This document provides the detailed results of the survey.

Number of Respondents: 33

Response Rate: 33/48= 68.75%

Q1: Is the college utilizing the Ability to Benefit (ATB) provisions?

Of the 33 respondents, 57% (19) indicated that they utilize the ATB provisions for adult education students while 42% (14) are not using ATB provisions. The following reasons were listed for not using ATB:

- No integrated program available
- Do not have a program that meets the criteria of an "eligible career pathway program"
- Unclear of the criteria for ATB provisions

Figure 1 represents the results from the survey, while also including the "unknown" for the population surveyed (all 48 community colleges).

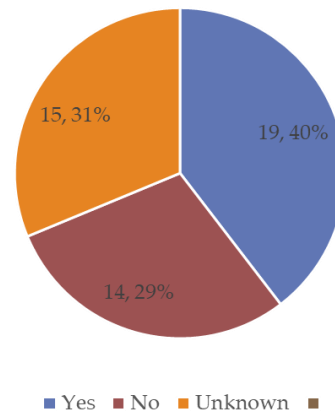


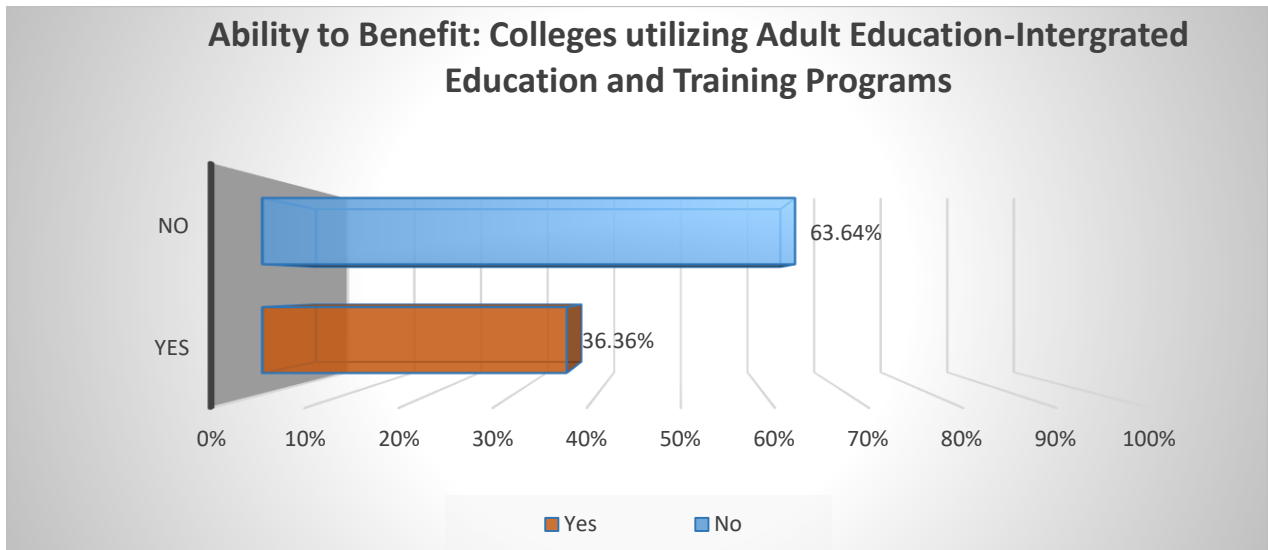
Figure 1

Q2: Specifically, is the college utilizing Ability to Benefit for adult students enrolled in Adult Education -Integrated Education and Training programs?

Participating colleges indicated that they utilize ATB for adult students enrolled in Adult Education-Integrated Education and Training programs at a rate of 36.36% (12) while 63.64% (21) are not utilizing the Integrated Education and Training programs (see Figure 2). Reasons for not utilizing ATB for students enrolled in integrated education and training included:

- No integrated program available
- no enrollment in ATB
- ATB is underutilized at the institution

Figure 2



Q3: Who are the primary populations utilizing the ATB provisions?

Only one institution identified that English learners utilize the Ability to Benefit provisions, while adult education students (without a high school diploma or its equivalent) used the ATB provisions at 27.7%. The remaining 69.7% of respondents indicated “not applicable”.

Q4: Please describe any challenges (past or current) in your institution’s implementation of the ATB provisions.

- Lack of knowledge of who and when can use ATB under the new guidelines (7)
- The current ATB provisions limit which students actually can qualify to receive federal aid (5)
- No challenges (4)
- Establishing an “eligible career pathway program” (3)
- Cross-departmental coordination and training (3)
- Not having eligible students (2)
- Identification and promotion of opportunity
- “We widely used ATB when it was as option for financial aid not just for career tech programs with very specific criteria.”
- “Have to acquire license to administer CELSA to establish eligibility. Informing Financial Aid staff of this option.”
- “Financial aid and testing processes are overwhelming for students.”
- “Advising students on the ATB process which is outside the normal orientation process is challenging.”
- “Evaluating the regulation properly to ensure students receive proper Title IV funding.”

Q5: What do other colleges need to consider as they scale implementation of ATB?

- Not sure (5)
- Ensure frontline staff understand the ATB provisions and refer students to take an ATB test. (3)
- Communication plans with departments and students (3)
- Develop a process for monitoring program changes to ensure student still qualifies for aid under ATB (2)
- Information Guides and Materials for Students, Families, and Parties unfamiliar with ATB. (2)
- Communication plans with departments and students (2)
- “Assisting ICAPS students with 6 credit hours of tuition so they can qualify under ATB.”
- “The ATB process needs to be formalized and documented at the community college in order to better serve the students.”
- “I think consistency across the board with interpreting ATB regulations.”
- “Adult education students need to be properly educated on what happens when they drop a class, or stop showing up for class. Financial aid staff need to be properly trained on how to implement ATB and explain financial aid to adult education students.”

- “Considerations include: mounting need to incorporate WIOA standards in adult education. Quality and momentum around Bridge (transition program) for students. Multiple entities with which we are governed and responsible to.”
- “Demographics”