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Three regional colleges awarded $4 million grant to help students return and complete college

Three regional colleges have been awarded a five-year, $4 million federal grant to address one of the most pressing national challenges in higher education — helping students who have "stopped out" of college return and complete a credential.

Led by Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, the partnership includes Wilmington College and Southern State Community College.

The project is supported by the 2026 Strengthening Institutions Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Labor on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education.

More than 37 million working-age Americans have attended college but earned no credential, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's *2025 Some College, No Credential Report*. While more than 1 million returned to college in the 2023-24 academic year, they represented less than 3% of that population.

"Students who leave college before finishing have already invested time, money and hope in their education," said Cincinnati State President Robbin Hoopes. "By working together to help them finish, we can open doors for those students and strengthen the workforce our region depends on."

The partnership spans urban and rural communities and public and private higher education. Cincinnati State is a large urban public community college, Wilmington is a private liberal arts college, and Southern State is a rural public community college. Their different missions and student populations will allow the partners to examine which approaches work across institutions and which need to be adapted to students' circumstances.

The project builds on CState Complete, a Cincinnati State initiative developed through an earlier Strengthening Institutions Program grant. It combines personal outreach, peer connections and coordinated assistance to help former students overcome barriers to returning. From fall 2024 through fall 2025, CState Complete helped 988 students return to Cincinnati State. During that period, 98 participating students graduated, earning 104 credentials.

"CState Complete has shown us the difference a personal connection can make in helping a student return," said Geoffrey Woolf, project director and Cincinnati State vice president for the student experience. "This partnership gives us the opportunity to build on that experience, test new ideas and learn what works for students in different college settings."

Using lessons from CState Complete, Wilmington and Southern State will develop their own approaches. Wilmington plans to explore faculty connections as a way to reconnect with former students, while Southern State will adapt outreach and support to the needs of rural learners.

Wilmington College President Corey Cockerill noted that the project builds on a history of successful partnerships among the three colleges.

“A pause in college does not have to mean the end of that journey,” Cockerill said. “Our goal is to help students navigate their return and move toward successful degree completion.”

Southern State Community College President Nicole Roades emphasized that helping stopped-out students return and finish requires collaboration, innovation and a shared commitment to student success.

“Many left college because life presented obstacles, not because they lacked the ability or desire to succeed,” Roades said. “Through this project, we have an opportunity to welcome those students back, provide the support they need, and celebrate their accomplishments as they complete the credentials they set out to earn.”

Throughout the five-year project, the colleges will work as a collaborative learning community, testing and refining approaches and measuring their effects on re-enrollment, retention and credential completion.

The partners will share their findings and practical guidance with other colleges to help more students complete an education they began.

ABOUT CINCINNATI STATE — Cincinnati State (www.cincinnatistate.edu) offers more than 170 bachelor, associate and certificate programs, a nationally recognized cooperative learning program, and custom training through its Workforce Development Center. Students benefit from small classes, high quality instruction, flexible scheduling and affordable tuition.

ABOUT WILMINGTON COLLEGE — Wilmington College believes that purpose isn’t something to be postponed — it’s something to be pursued with passion and urgency. The College thrives on empowering students, strengthening our community and redefining the future of education. Founded by Quakers in 1870, the College enrolls approximately 1,150 students, including those on its main campus, online and at several branch campus programs. Also, WC has graduate programs in Occupational Therapy, Organizational Leadership and Agriculture. WC students compete in 24 NCAA D-III varsity sports and field an equestrian team, while also participating in more than 50 student organizations.

ABOUT SOUTHERN STATE — Delivering on its mission to provide an affordable, accessible, high-quality education, Southern State offers associate degree programs, certificate programs, bachelor’s degree completion through on-site partnership agreements, adult basic literacy courses, GED (ASPIRE), and workforce training programs. With two locations – the Brown County location in Mt. Orab and the Central Campus in Hillsboro -- Southern State provides close-to-home convenience and a supportive community experience. The College also offers courses in aviation maintenance, airframe, and powerplant at Laurel Oaks in Wilmington – Clinton County.

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