

Alabama's Success Plus Initiative: An Update on Degree and Credential Attainment, 2018-2025

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Alabama Commission on Higher Education

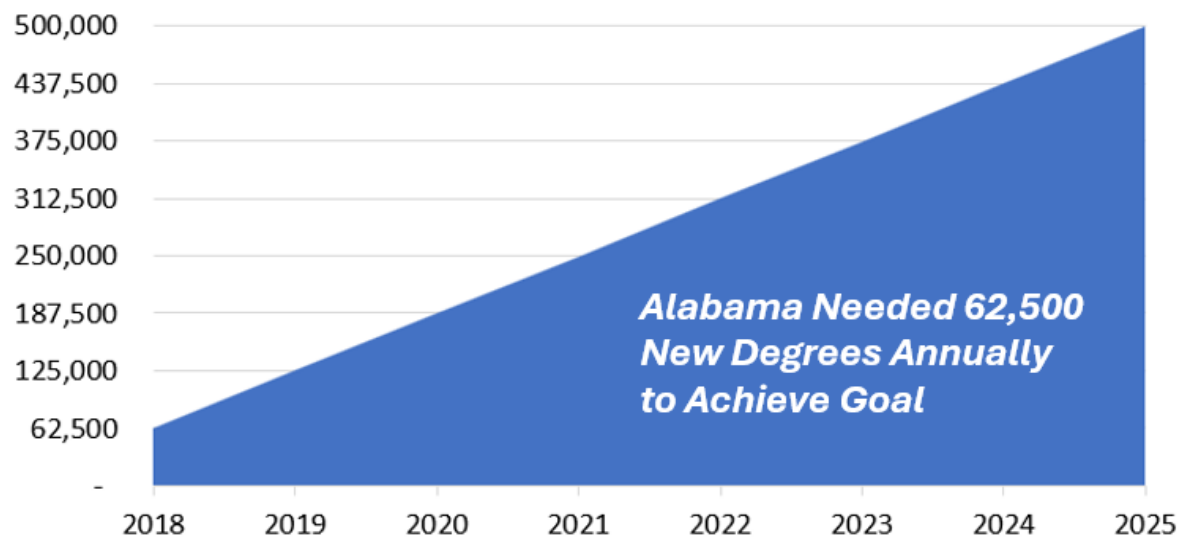
Alabama's Success Plus Initiative: An Update on Degree and Credential Attainment, 2018-2025

SUCCESS PLUS INITIATIVE

The Success Plus Initiative is a statewide workforce development and educational attainment strategy launched under Governor Kay Ivey in 2018. Its core mission is to prepare Alabama's labor force for current and future high-demand jobs by significantly increasing the number of residents with a postsecondary education. To do this, the initiative set an ambitious goal of adding 500,000 newly credentialed workers to the state's workforce by 2025 to help meet industry demand and remain competitive in an ever-changing global economy. As shown in Figure 1, Alabama would have needed to produce an average of 62,500 new degree and credential earners annually over the eight-year period (2018–2025) to achieve the goal.

Figure 1

Cumulative First-time Degree and Credential Attainment Needed to Achieve Attainment Goal, 2018-2021



Source: Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE), November 2025.

Success Plus emphasizes alignment between education and workforce needs while improving access to training that clearly defines pathways from education to employment. The initiative encourages collaboration among educational institutions, industry partners, and state agencies to identify valuable credentials and design career pathways that align with high-demand fields. Tools such as career exploration platforms and enhanced data systems help individuals make informed decisions about education and training tied to workforce opportunities.

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1 below shows approximately 487,937 Alabamians earned new post-secondary credentials from 2018 through 2025. These estimates suggest Alabama’s degree and credential production efforts showed meaningful progress but revealed the state was slightly behind the pace of 62,500 degrees needed annually to meet its goal of adding 500,000 newly credentialed workers to the workforce by 2025.

Table 1
First-time Degree and Credential Attainment, 2018-2025

| YEAR | DEGREES | CERTIFICATES | CERTIFICATIONS | LICENSES | APPRENTICESHIPS | TOTAL | % OF ANNUAL TARGET |
|-------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 2018 | 42,757 | 8,946 | 10,157 | 55 | 259 | 62,174 | 99.5% |
| 2019 | 41,519 | 10,627 | 11,594 | 403 | 170 | 64,313 | 102.9% |
| 2020 | 42,068 | 8,529 | 13,234 | 539 | 189 | 64,559 | 103.3% |
| 2021 | 40,001 | 8,742 | 8,888 | 552 | 438 | 58,621 | 93.8% |
| 2022 | 37,419 | 10,219 | 8,656 | 566 | 529 | 57,389 | 91.8% |
| 2023 | 35,186 | 10,932 | 9,561 | 580 | 592 | 56,851 | 91.0% |
| 2024 | 35,596 | 12,240 | 10,019 | 595 | 755 | 59,205 | 94.7% |
| 2025 | 37,102 | 13,705 | 12,555 | 610 | 853 | 64,825 | 103.7% |
| TOTAL | 311,648 | 83,940 | 84,664 | 3,900 | 3,785 | 487,937 | 97.6% |
| % OF TOTAL | 63.9% | 17.2% | 17.4% | 0.8% | 0.8% | | |

Notes: Figures for private colleges and universities are estimated.
Source: Alabama Commission on Higher Education, Federal IPEDS Surveys, Alabama Office of Apprenticeship.

This updated analysis by ACHE relies on estimates using agency data for public institutions, federal IPEDS data for private institutions, and apprenticeship and certification data from the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship (AOA) and Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT).

Based on the available data—without conducting a comprehensive evaluation—our analysis suggests the state was slightly short of the goal of producing 500,000 new degrees or credentials by approximately 12,000 awards.

This shortfall appears to be largely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred at a critical midpoint of the initiative’s 2018–2025 timeframe. The pandemic significantly disrupted college enrollment, student persistence, credential completion, and workforce participation across the state, creating unfavorable conditions for college attainment. While the numeric target was not fully achieved, the broader impact of Success Plus should not be overlooked. The initiative was widely successful in elevating statewide awareness of the essential connection between the postsecondary education system and its workforce needs.

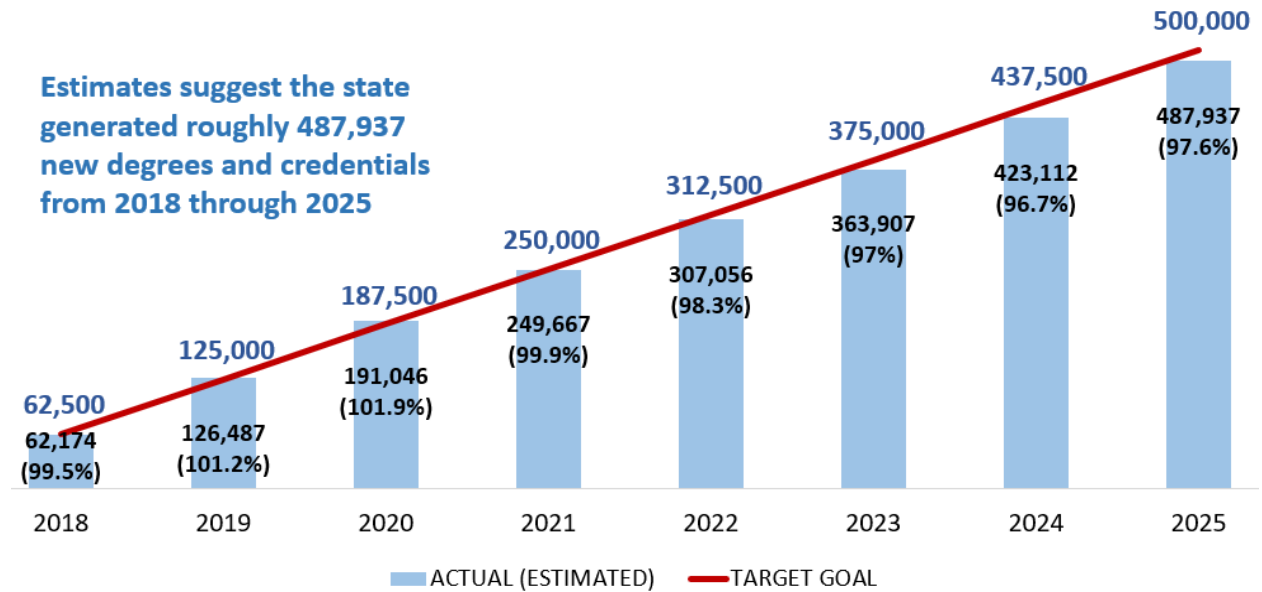
This strengthened alignment between higher education and workforce development remains as one of the initiative’s most enduring outcomes.

Figures 2 and 3 provide an estimate of new degree and credential production throughout the duration of the Success Plus initiative. Incorporating estimates from the mid-point evaluation, these estimates are provided using data from ACHE’s student record databases, federal IPEDS

completions surveys, and various state agencies such as the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship. The state generated approximately 487,937 new degree and credential earners, attaining 97.6% of the established goal and narrowly missing the target by roughly 12,000 degrees over the eight-year period.

Figure 2

Estimated total new degree and credential earners, 2018-2025

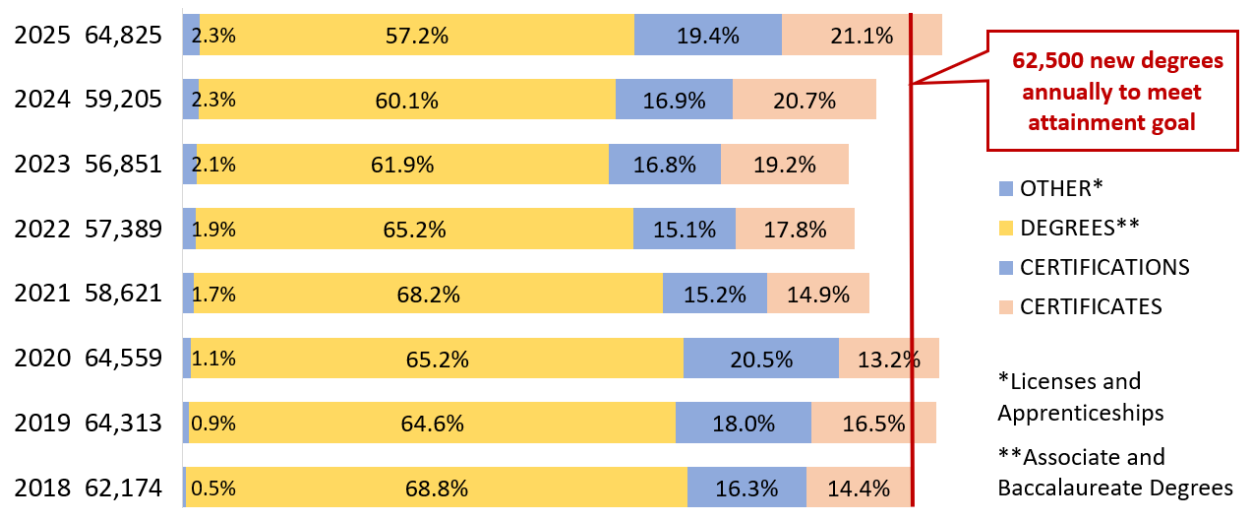


Notes: Figures for private colleges and universities are estimated.

Sources: Alabama Commission on Higher Education, Federal IPEDS Surveys, Alabama Office of Apprenticeship.

Figure 3

Estimated new degree and credential earners by degree level, 2018-2025



Notes: Figures for private colleges and universities are estimated.

Sources: Alabama Commission on Higher Education, IPEDS Completions Surveys, Alabama Office of Apprenticeship.

SUCCESS PLUS 2.0

As state policymakers consider the next phase of educational attainment planning, national benchmarks provide important context. The Lumina Foundation has established a new national goal, calling for 75% of U.S. adults to hold a valuable degree or credential by 2040. This target reflects a growing emphasis on credentials that lead to meaningful employment, economic mobility, and long-term workforce stability. As Alabama evaluates future attainment goals, a deliberate focus on the value of credentials—not solely their volume—is encouraged, using definitions and labor-market alignment principles consistent with state and national standards.

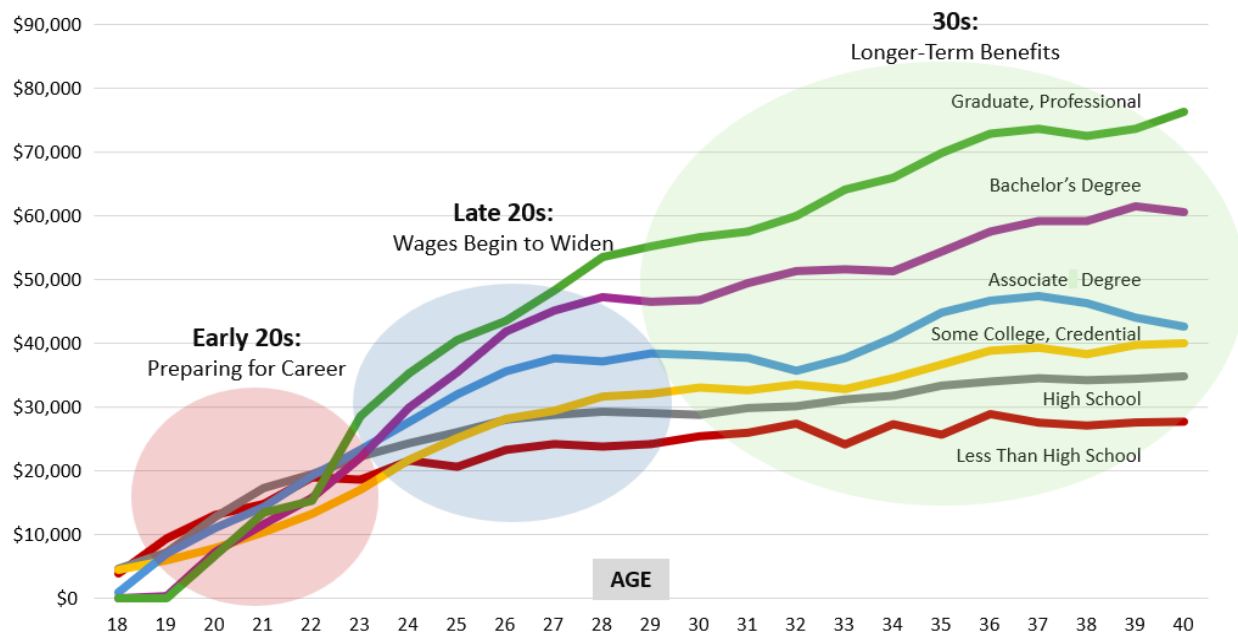
Leverage existing programming and initiatives. In advancing toward these national benchmarks, Alabama should build upon and expand strategies that have already demonstrated effectiveness. Initiatives such as (Re)Engage Alabama, which focuses on re-enrolling adults with some college but no credential, and Pathway to Progress, which strengthens structured academic and career pathways aligned with workforce demand in targeted communities, represent scalable models for increasing attainment among priority populations. Leveraging these existing strategies allows the state to capitalize on established infrastructure, institutional experience, and cross-agency partnerships rather than creating entirely new programs.

Emphasize academic programming that impacts economic outcomes. ACHE research based on census data suggests that short-term credentials can provide measurable earnings gains for individuals, particularly when they are stackable throughout an individual's career. However, on their own, they do not generate income levels sufficient enough to meaningfully change the state's broader economic trajectory. Accordingly, future attainment goals should prioritize credentials aligned with critical occupations with targeted emphasis on associate and baccalaureate level credentials in high-demand fields. This balanced approach better supports long-term economic growth while continuing to address immediate workforce needs and advancing Alabama toward attainment benchmarks.

Figure 4 reflects median annual wage earnings by age and education level for Alabama workers. The data shows the need to emphasize associate and baccalaureate degrees over short-term credentials, as longitudinal income disparities widen between these levels. These differences become more pronounced after age 30, with earning from short-term credentials leveling off at only slightly above those of a high school education.

Figure 4

Median Annual Wages by Age and Education Level Among Alabama’s Workers, 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey (Microdata Samples), IPUMS, November 2025

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the Success Plus Initiative and the state’s progress toward the 500,000 credential goal, Success Plus should be viewed not as a finite sprint, but as the foundation for a sustained and permanent workforce-attainment system. Achieving approximately 488,000 degrees or credentials—nearly 98% of the stated goal—represents substantial progress and demonstrates that coordinated alignment among education and training providers, employers, and state agencies can yield large-scale gains.

The proximity to the target suggests the initiative’s core strategy was sound, even if external disruptions prevented full attainment. Moving forward, the emphasis should shift from closing the numerical gap to sustaining and strengthening the completion pipeline.

Strengthening these data pipeline foundations will support informed policymaking as Alabama transitions from a one-time attainment initiative to a durable, outcomes-driven workforce development system.

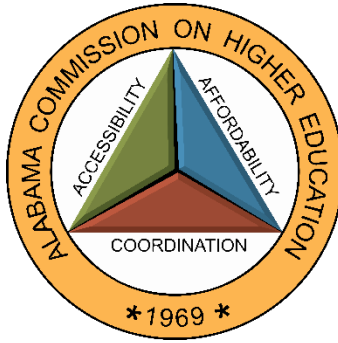
Maintaining momentum is more consequential than reaching an exact benchmark, particularly to prevent credential production from plateauing as the visibility of a major initiative diminishes. Accordingly, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Embed employer-informed credential pathways into routine funding models, advising structures, and institutional performance expectations to institutionalize the gains achieved under Success Plus.

- Prioritize workforce relevance by aligning credentials with high-demand occupations—particularly in healthcare, advanced manufacturing, logistics, information technology, and construction—where credentials show the greatest value for individuals and employers.
- Leverage short-term and stackable credentials as effective entry points, especially when designed to transition into higher-value programs rather than standalone.
- Center adult learners within Alabama’s attainment strategy by expanding and strengthening re-enrollment and completion efforts for working adults. Progress at the scale achieved under Success Plus would not have been possible without this population. Proven initiatives such as (Re)Engage Alabama and Pathway to Progress should be expanded to scale access and completion using existing infrastructure.
- Address regional variation in attainment outcomes by implementing targeted strategies that mitigate barriers such as transportation, broadband access, childcare, cost, and employer engagement. Achieving future attainment goals—especially the “last mile”—will require focused support for communities facing structural challenges to participation and completion, including expansion of initiatives such as Pathway to Progress to support associate degree holders pursuing baccalaureate credentials in high-need regions.
- Seek ways to reduce the time to degree/credential by increasing the number of competency-based coursework at colleges and universities.
- Strengthen data quality and clarity as attainment goals become more ambitious and outcomes approach target thresholds by ensuring:
 - Clear definitions of what constitutes a meaning credential,
 - Safeguards against unnecessary duplication, and
 - Consistent tracking of credential portability and labor-market value to support credibility, accountability, and future goal-setting.

SUMMARY

In the context of a rapidly evolving economy and rising expectations for postsecondary attainment nationwide, the Success Plus Initiative demonstrates how intentional alignment between education, workforce demand, and learner support can drive meaningful progress at scale. Building on national momentum to ensure that credentials deliver real economic value, Success Plus advanced access, completion, and workforce relevance across Alabama by prioritizing high-demand fields, engaging adult learners, and strengthening pathways from entry-level credentials to higher-value degrees. Complementary strategies, including Pathway to Progress and (Re)Engage Alabama, reinforced these efforts by addressing regional disparities, re-engaging working adults, and reducing structural barriers to completion. Together, these coordinated approaches underscore that attainment gains are most durable when credentials are aligned with labor-market needs, supported through completion, and embedded within a long-term system rather than a time-limited initiative. As Alabama looks ahead, the outcomes of Success Plus provide a strong foundation for sustaining momentum, expanding opportunity, and ensuring that postsecondary education remains a reliable engine of economic mobility and shared prosperity.



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The Alabama Commission on Higher Education is the state's coordinating body for public higher education, established to provide guidance and coordination on policy development and strategic planning for Alabama's postsecondary institutions. Its primary responsibilities include reviewing and approving new academic programs, coordinating state and federal funding for colleges and universities, and ensuring higher education in Alabama is efficient, accessible, and aligned with state economic and workforce needs.

ACHE leverages data as a strategic asset by systematically collecting, analyzing, and sharing postsecondary education data to inform policy decisions, improve institutional performance, and support statewide workforce and attainment goals. These data support alignment between academic programs and labor-market needs, evaluation of initiatives such as Success Plus, and guidance for funding, authorization, and strategic planning. Emphasis on data quality, cross-agency collaboration, and transparent reporting ensures that data not only measure outcomes but also drive continuous improvement and long-term educational and economic planning.

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