Effective Strategies for Recruiting and Engaging Adult Learners

In the following report, Hanover reviews best practices for recruiting adult students. The report specifically highlights strategies related to effective marketing messaging and channels, outreach, and support during the college search process, and website optimization. Hanover also offers a high-level overview of different segments of the adult learner population.

Adult students are an increasingly important segment of the higher education market. At many colleges and universities this group already represents a larger portion of the population than traditionally aged students, and the much discussed impending enrollment cliff among 18-22 year olds threatens to make adult students even more important to meeting enrollment goals. At the same time, adult undergraduate enrollment fell in 2020, signaling that these students will not arrive on campus without an active recruitment plan. In this brief, Hanover summarizes key factors in recruiting adult students.

KEY FINDINGS

Adult students have different priorities than their traditionally aged counterparts. In particular, adult students are most concerned about financing their education, balancing their commitments, and performing well academically. These students may have struggled with higher education in the past and therefore lack confidence about their ability to succeed in college. Institutions should address these concerns directly in their marketing messaging. For instance, it is important to ensure that scholarships, discounts, corporate partnerships, and credit transfer policies are easily accessible to prospects. Effective marketing for adult learners should also employ an inviting tone to combat any apprehension prospective students may be feeling

Family, friends, and colleagues are the most common sources of information for adult students in the college search process. As a result, word-of-mouth marketing is an important tool in adult learner recruitment. Note, however, that optimal marketing channels may vary by population segment. Uncommon sources of information include college guidance counselors or online websites that are designed to compare institutions.

Ongoing personalized support throughout the admissions and enrollment process boosts engagement and applications among adult learners. Adult students face a myriad of barriers as they reenter college. Recruiters and staff should strive for regular touchpoints with prospects and provide student-centric support that caters to each applicant's individual needs.

ADULT LEARNER SEGMENTS

FOUR PERSONAS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Key to recruiting adult students is the recognition that "adult learners" are not a monolithic group. Marketing firm Lipman Hearne recommends taking a more nuanced approach to marketing to adult learners by recognizing and addressing different student motivations and needs. After surveying adult learners in 2019, Lipman Hearne developed the four personas below to describe different types of adult learners and what motivates them. Institutions should consider tailoring information to fit the varying motivations one finds among adult learners.

• Unemployed students that hope to **work again in a different field** and seek programs that will provide **leadership** opportunities • Interested in **part-time, online programs** • Outreach should focus on **program options and outcomes**, as well as **institutional reputation** or testimonials	• Students who are certain of their career path and are interested in the **traditional academic experience** • Interested in **full-time, on-campus programs** • Outreach should focus on the **campus experience** and **institutional reputation**	• Students without a clear career path, but are driven to make a positive impact • Interested in **customizing their education** to their needs and programs with at least some **in-person programming** • Outreach should focus on how an education can help them **achieve their goals**	• Young and unemployed students who looking for a **pathway to a job** and are likely to be **overwhelmed by the admissions process** • Interested in the **emotional benefits** of education (e.g., gaining confidence) and **hybrid or online learning** • Outreach should focus on **supports, ROI, and flexibility**
Reinventors	**Scholars**	**Change Makers**	**Seekers**

Source: Lipman Hearne

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MARKETING MESSAGING FOR ADULT LEANERS
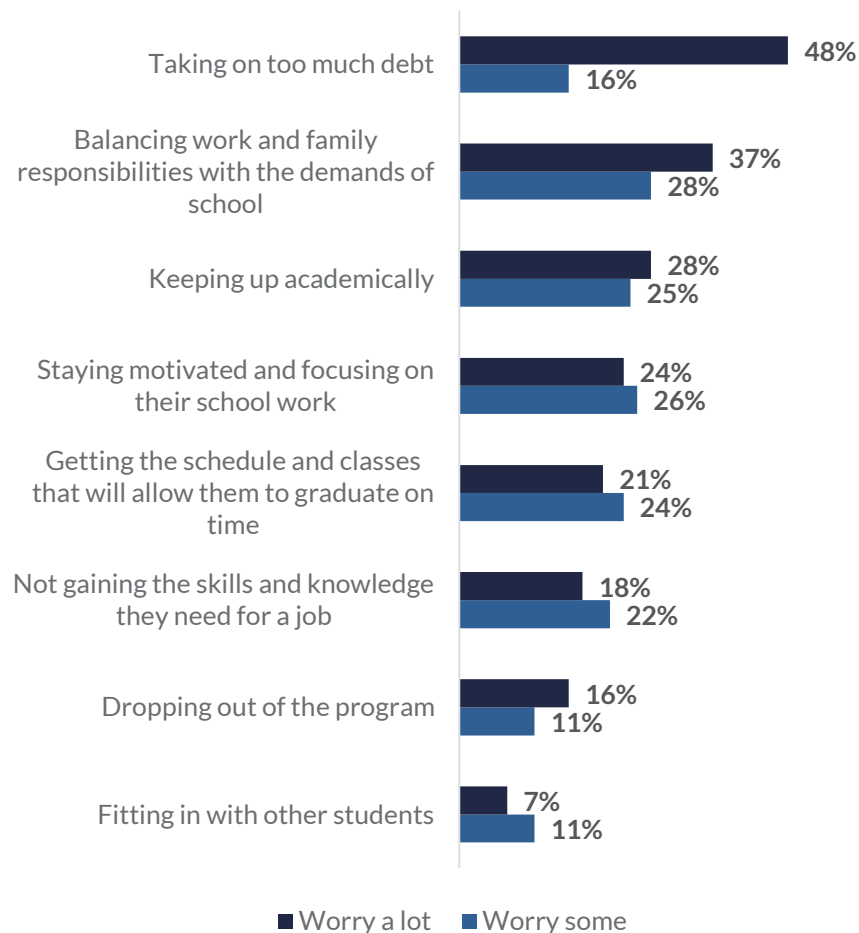
PRIORITIES AND CONCERNS OF ADULT LEARNERS

According to a survey by Public Agenda, adult students' "main priorities are to gain knowledge and skills that will be directly relevant to the workplace, and to do so at an affordable price and under the guidance of caring and qualified teachers." These findings echo considerations offered by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). CAEL notes that adult learners are career- and outcome-oriented and require guidance, even though many are self-directed. Achieving positive outcomes with this audience requires institutions to craft their marketing messaging to speak to the unique motivations and needs of this target audience. Job placement services, real-world experience, and hands-on assistance with financial aid applications are particularly attractive to adult students.

Institutions can also utilize marketing messaging to address adult students' concerns about college. As shown in the figure to the right, they are most worried about financing their education, balancing their commitments, and performing well academically.

> Higher Ed Insight explains that institutions can **attract students with prior college credit** through **designated webpages with tailored information**, such as information on degree completion programs, answers to common questions about returning to college, or a credit transfer tool.

CONCERNS AMONG ADULT LEARNERS AGES 22 TO 55 AS THEY CONSIDER COLLEGE, 2013

Concern	Worry a lot	Worry some
Taking on too much debt	48%	16%
Balancing work and family responsibilities with the demands of school	37%	28%
Keeping up academically	28%	25%
Staying motivated and focusing on their school work	24%	26%
Getting the schedule and classes that will allow them to graduate on time	21%	24%
Not gaining the skills and knowledge they need for a job	18%	22%
Dropping out of the program	16%	11%
Fitting in with other students	7%	11%

■ Worry a lot ■ Worry some

Source: Public Agenda

MARKETING STRATEGY FOR ADULT LEANERS

APPEALING TO ADULT LEARNERS

Adult learners may associate college with negative emotions, such as apprehension or shame. In particular, research shows that students with prior credit display a "lack of self-confidence upon reentry to college." OHO Interactive explains that institutions should consider and address these emotions in their marketing and recruitment scheme. The figures below summarize examples of useful content and marketing strategies for adult students.

MARKETING CONTENT FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Use Career-Focused Imagery	Adult students typically do not respond to images of in-class learning. Instead, they are drawn to imagery that aligns with their professional motivations, such as photographs of students working in the industry or role they hope to enter after graduating.
Demonstrate Credibility	While most adult learners are initially unaware of non-profit and for-profit classifications, they often become less trustful of for-profit colleges once they learn about the distinction.
Highlight Tuition and Aid	Cost is the most salient enrollment consideration for adult learners considering community colleges, especially among Hispanic students. Be sure to highlight topics related to affordability including scholarships, discounts, corporate partnerships, and credit transfer policies.

Source: OHO Interactive

MARKETING APPROACH FOR ADULT LEARNERS

- Use an inviting tone in marketing materials
- Increase the simplicity and accessibility of forms and information
- Offer low-stakes entry points for prospects, such as informal gatherings
- Use calls to action that push for personal interactions with admissions staff
- Offer a variety of contact methods and allow prospects to pick the option they are most comfortable with
- Allow prospects to remain anonymous for as long as they are ambivalent about engaging
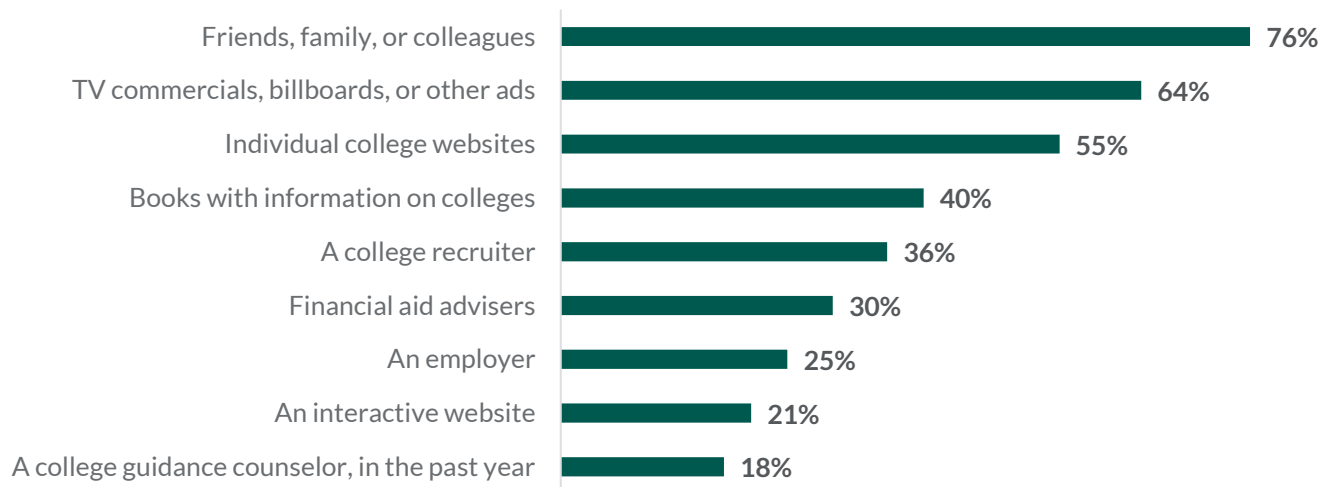
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MOST USED MARKETING CHANNELS

Conventional recruitment methods are less effective for capturing adult students, who typically obtain information on colleges from their personal networks. Additionally, adult learners are harder to locate as they cannot be reached through high schools or organizations that administer entrance exams like their traditionally aged counterparts. Family, friends, and colleagues are the most common sources of information for adult students during the college search process. Institutions should focus on word-of-mouth marketing to improve reach, particularly among prospective students aged 25 years or older. Other important channels include ads, such as TV commercials and billboards, and institutional websites. However, due to the diversity of the adult student population, optimal marketing channels may vary by segment. For example, according to Deborah A. Santiago, CEO of Excelencia in Education, "Spanish-language radio is a must" for reaching Hispanic adult students.

Partnerships with community-based organizations may bolster recruitment efforts. Just over half (52 percent) of surveyed adult students planning to return to college within the next few years reported that "workshops with college experts at community centers of similar venues would be very helpful." The same research shows that adult students value receiving impartial assistance in choosing a college and navigating the admissions and financial aid process.

RESOURCES USED BY ADULT LEARNERS AGES 18 TO 55 DURING THE COLLEGE SEARCH, 2013

Resource	Percentage
Friends, family, or colleagues	76%
TV commercials, billboards, or other ads	64%
Individual college websites	55%
Books with information on colleges	40%
A college recruiter	36%
Financial aid advisers	30%
An employer	25%
An interactive website	21%
A college guidance counselor, in the past year	18%

Source: Public Agenda

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SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Institutions should ensure that websites are well-advertised through Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Institutional websites become increasingly important as adult learners progress through the college search process. Recent research shows that organic search results account for 61 percent of website traffic and 40 percent of website conversions in higher education. Additionally, nine in ten individuals never go beyond the first page of Google search results. As a result, visibility in search engine results is critical.

SEO involves "on-page" optimization via content production, key terms or phrases, metainformation, and site responsiveness, as well as "off-page" optimizations that boost visibility, such as building external links and references to a site and social media marketing. While many organizations partner with SEO firms to improve their rankings, several techniques can be easily implemented by university personnel. Michigan Technological University offers five in-house strategies for improving SEO:

Publish Relevant Content

Content is the primary factor in search rankings. Quality content that caters to target audiences increases traffic and improves relevance. Repeat key words and phrases throughout a page, without compromising readability or quality.

Update Content Regularly

Frequently updated content is one of the best indicators of a site's relevancy.

Use Metadata

Metadata is information in code or files that describes a site's content and should be updated as a site changes over time. This includes title, description, and keyword metadata.

Make a Link-Worthy Site

Create links with descriptive text using keywords, rather than "click here." This will improve the site's ranking, as well as the ranking of linked page.

Use "Alt" Tags

To aid search engines in locating relevant information on a webpage, use alternative text descriptions or "alt" tags to describe images and videos in the page code.

Source: Michigan Technological University.

USER EXPERIENCE

Ensure that the information adult learners value is available and easily accessible. Institutions may lose prospects if the information that prospects seek is hard to find or missing. According to the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, there are three key factors that determine a website's effectiveness for degree completers: easy navigation, clear steps on how to re-enroll, and contact information for the designated adult student contact at the institution. For adult learners more broadly, OHO Interactive reports that program information and curriculum details are critical. Therefore, institutional websites should have a robust program section that cover the following information for each of its offerings:

- Program overview,
- Faculty information with terminal degrees,
- Tuition or cost per credit,
- Next start date,
- Admissions process, and
- Outcomes.

WEBSITE STRUCTURE

Consider using a designated subdomain or separate URL for adult learners.

Subdomains/separate URLs allow institutions to adapt the interface, images, navigation and content to fit the needs of adult learners. This approach also allows for the consolidation of all adult-centered content in one environment, making the user experience much easier for adult learners. The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, Champlain College, and the University of Incarnate Word are examples of institutions that have developed subdomains for their adult student populations.
Source: Abound
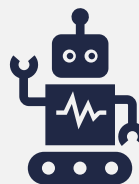
According to a technology reporter at Inside Higher Ed, "more and more colleges are deploying **virtual assistants or chatbots** to communicate with students." Chatbots offer a virtual **"one-stop-shop" for prospects' inquiries**. They improve the user experience by allowing users to obtain answers to their specific questions while meeting expectations of **instant, around-the-clock communication.**

Spotlight: Nichols College

Nichols College recently redesigned its website to better meet the needs of its different student populations. The site features a drop-down menu that allows users to identify their student type, so they can be directed to a webpage specifically created to meet their needs. Selecting "returning learner" takes adult students to a webpage that provides key information related to flexible scheduling, competency-based education, cost, and next steps.
Source: Abound