Student Segment Guide: Adult Degree Completers

Online and Hybrid Education Strategy, Part III

Three Ways to Use This Resource

- Understand the potential (and limitations) of online programs targeting adult degree completer students
- Communicate and clarify online learning strategy to faculty and external stakeholders
- Develop targeted online and hybrid programs based on the latest market intelligence

EAB

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Student interactions annually

1M+
Individuals on our student success management system

1,200+
Institutions we are proud to serve

1
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Executive Summary

Five Keys to Effectively Serve Adult Degree Completer Students

Develop programs based on student and employer demand

Degree completion students return to gain a credential for either career advancement or a career change. In order to remain competitive, institutions should develop and offer programs in popular fields (e.g. business administration) to target students with specific goals in mind while also offering general degrees (e.g. liberal studies) to accommodate students with diverse prior credit accumulation.

Benchmark pricing strategy to competition

For degree completion prospects, who often carry debt from prior college experience, tuition and pricing strategies often become a key factor in their decision to return to college. To remain competitive in this market, institutions must conduct a competition landscape analysis to identify other institutions operating in this space and understand their pricing strategy before developing their own tuition models.

Create advising partnerships with community colleges to target transfer students

Transfer students are a potential source of prospective students for degree completion programs. In order to reduce the barriers associated with transfer, institutions should develop strategic partnerships with feeder community colleges. These partnerships include clear credit articulation agreements and integrated advising services.

Develop targeted student success offerings to facilitate retention and completion

Access to student support services is particularly important for degree completers because they have been outside the higher education space for many years and may also be unfamiliar with the strategies necessary for successful online learning. Institutions should monitor financial and academic stop-out risk among their students, and encourage re-enrollment to facilitate degree completion.

Understand the potential and limitations of alternative credit programs

Before developing a competency-based education (CBE) curriculum institutions should understand the risks associated with it. It is crucial for colleges and universities to determine whether students and employers are demanding CBE and what costs are involved (for both students and institutions) prior to launching such a curriculum. In order to accommodate the diverse experiences of degree completers, institutions can achieve personalized learning at scale through consistent and easily accessible prior learning assessment policies.

Degree Completion Hype Doesn't Reflect Reality

Not All Degree Completion Prospects are Likely to Complete

Data suggests that there are 31 million students with some prior college credits but no degree. However, further segmentation shows that not all students within this category are equally likely to re-enroll. In fact, National Student Clearinghouse analysis found that only 4 million students had the necessary qualities (i.e. had enrolled in multiple terms and completed at least two years of degree progress) to be considered a viable market for degree completion programs.

The Hype

31M

Size of degree completion market (some college, no degree) often cited—used in vendor sales pitches, strategic plans.

12.4%

31.9%

55.7%
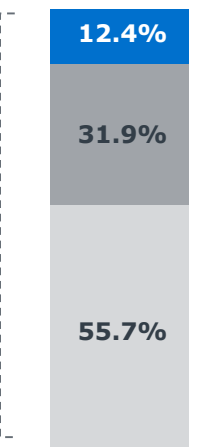
The Reality of "Potential Completers"

4M

■ **Potential completers**
(multiple term enrollees with 2 years' progress or more)

■ One-term enrollees

☐ Multiple-term enrollees with less than 2 years' progress

NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE®

Key Characteristics

- Most common potential completer is between 24-29 years old
- Men represent a slightly smaller proportion (trend younger)
- For 17% of potential completers, seven or more years has elapsed since their last enrollment
- 45.6% attended only one institution and 36% attended only two institutions

For more information about how EAB can help institutions identify and recruit adult students, please see our Adult Learner Recruitment Service on eab.com

There are important characteristics to consider before serving potential completers. They are more likely to be between the age of 24 and 29 years old. The gender distribution is almost equal; however, men make up a slightly smaller proportion of completers, and they tend to be younger. Approximately 17% of potential completers have been out of the higher education system for more than seven years and will need significant student support services to navigate their return to college. While expanding and developing program offerings that cater to degree completion students can complement an institution's mission and support its financial stability, segmenting the market to account for a student's higher education experience will allow institutions to set more realistic enrollment targets.

Career Relevance Key to Attracting Swirling Adults

Breadth and Depth of Online Offerings Influence Prospects' Enrollment Decisions

This population is motivated by expected career outcomes. In fact, a recent survey found that 71% of adults planning to pursue a degree do so to expand their career options. Either they have reached a point in their current career path where they cannot advance without a Bachelor's-level degree or they are considering changing careers and need a new credential to set themselves up for success. In order to effectively recruit potential degree completers, institutions should ensure that degree completion programs align with employer and student demand.

Motivations of Adult Degree Completion Students

Students enroll in degree completion programs for the following reasons:

Career Advancement: Cannot advance without a Bachelor's-level degree

Career Change: Wants to shift careers and needs a new credential

Personal Reasons: Seeking personal enrichment through additional education

Common degree programs include business management, mathematics, healthcare, social science, and liberal arts

Key Characteristics	**Bachelor's in specific field of study**	**Bachelor's in general field**
	• Typically requires completion of prior college credit • Similar to face-to-face programs • Offered in highly demanded subject areas	• Appeals to broad range of students • Can be customized by student • Can cater to students who didn't earn enough credits during prior college experience

Institutions often offer either degrees in industry-aligned fields of study (e.g. business management) or in a more general field (e.g. liberal studies or general studies). Both types of degrees accommodate students with different needs and goals. Programs that focus on a specific field of study are more likely to appeal to career changers as these students are hoping to gain particular skills to facilitate the transition to a new career. In contrast to this, degrees in general studies appeal to a broad range of students and allow students to customize their offerings to better accommodate their prior credits and professional learning experiences.

Adult Online Students Increasingly Price Sensitive

Assess Internal and External Program Prices to Determine Pricing Strategies

Since adult students commonly have student loan debt from previous attempts to earn a degree and may have exhausted their federal financial aid eligibility, they are even more cost-conscious than a first-time undergraduate. However, for many students, especially adult students, the price of a particular degree program vis-à-vis its competitors signals the quality and value it holds in the market. In order to ensure that programs are appealing to an institution's target market, administrators must benchmark pricing strategies to both internal and external competitors.

1

Identify Competitor Programs

Prioritize similar programs that enroll your audience rather than institutional peers

2

Collect Tuition and Fee Data

Record tuition and easily identifiable fees (e.g. distance education fees)

3

Calculate Total Program Cost

Use the collected data to calculate the program cost for the entire length of the program

4

Decide on Pricing Strategy

Set tuition: lower than the median, at the median, or higher than the median.

Heightened Competition from Low-Cost Degree Completion Programs

Estimated cost of total tuition based on assumed degree completion in two years

COLLEGE for AMERICA	WGU	Southern New Hampshire University	LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
$10,000[1]	$12,760	$19,200	$23,400

In the case of internal competitors, institutions should be aware of how their online tuition model compares to the tuition they charge in comparable face-to-face programs. For many institutions, equivalency between modalities is a selling point of their online offerings and huge price variations between the two might signal otherwise. Similarly, adult students generally focus on individual programs within their search and compare tuition and fees across their program of interest. To account for this, institutions should focus on competitor programs and program-specific costs, as opposed to institutional competitors and prices. This allows institutions to more accurately understand the market in which they operate and to develop a pricing strategy accordingly.

1) Based on advertised minimum yearly tuition

A Comprehensive Look at the Student Pipeline

Community College Transfer Students Ripe for Online Programs

Community college transfer students are an important subset of prospective adult degree completer students. They constitute a significant potential enrollment market in the U.S.; three million community college students transfer to four-year institutions each year, and surveys indicate that 60% to 80% of all first-year community college students intend to transfer and attain a baccalaureate degree. Many characteristics of community college students make them more likely to benefit from online program offerings.

25 and over	**Place-bound**	**Employed**	**Work full-time**
35% of community college students are 25 or older	79% of community college students enroll within 20 miles from home	46% of full-time community college students are employed	32% of full-time community college students work 20+ hours per week

Community College students are likely to benefit from the flexibility and convenience of online degree programs

Community college students are often mobility constrained, employed, and working full-time. These constraints on their time and ability to access higher education may limit their ability to transfer to a four-year institution. However, through the development of online degree completion programs, institutions will be able to effectively reach and target these students. In this case, the specific field and program offered by an institution is particularly important as transfer students are more likely to have specific career goals, such as converting an RN to a BSN. To reduce the administrative barriers associated with transfer, institutions should develop strategic advising partnerships with community colleges and create comprehensive articulation agreements.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2016, Fall Enrollment component. ; McFarland, J., Hussar, B., de Brey, C., Snyder, T., Wang, X., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Gebrekristos, S., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., and Hinz, S. (2017). The Condition of Education 2017 (NCES 2017-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.; U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October, 2005, 2010, and 2015.; John Fink and Davis Jenkins, *Community College Transfer Student Outcomes Report* (Community College Research Center, 2017). ; Brian A. Sponster and Nicholas Hillman, "Where you live rather than what you know? The problem with education deserts", *Brookings Institutions,* April 11, 2016.

Reducing Barriers to Transfer

UCF's Advising Partnership Hardwires Transfer Preparation

A predictable presence of four-year institutions on two-year campuses helps prepare students for transfer but it still requires them to seek out transfer guidance. The University of Central Florida (UCF) removed this burden through its DirectConnect program, which integrates its advising system with those of its community college partners. The DirectConnect program helps potential transfer students by linking transcript and test score data between the community colleges and UCF, initiated with students' consent during community college orientation.

Wrap-Around Advising Keeps Two-Year Students on Track, Widens the Transfer Pipeline

Traditional Transfer Pipeline	Student unsure of four-year financial aid and degree requirements	Student must take initiative to see an advisor and ensure progress to transfer	Student fails to complete paperwork, delaying admission or limiting credit transfer and financial aid
	1st Year at CC	**2nd Year at CC**	**Transfer**
DiRECT CONNECT TO UCF	**Subscribe Students from Day One**	**Begin Advising before Enrollment**	**Limit Student Responsibility**
	UCF enrollment staff lead financial aid workshops during two-year orientation, sign students up to advising mailing list	UCF advisors begin sharing advising caseload after 30 credits, take over full-time at 45 credits; students receive consistent communication through CRM	Shared transcripts and test scores between institutions limits student responsibility; advisors provide consistent reminders and reliable support

By enrolling in the DirectConnect program, community college students automatically receive advising reminders, reducing students' need to monitor transfer preparation. This automation also increases four-year staff's access to data, allowing them to provide the best possible counsel. Through DirectConnect, UCF now provides ongoing financial aid education, advising, and transfer communications to students at six community colleges in a fifty-mile radius of the institution.

Impact of Well-Developed Transfer Pipeline

Partnerships Increase Transfer, Grow Online Student Population

Over 41,000 students have transferred to UCF since the program's launch in 2006. While DirectConnect increases the transfer student population regardless of modality, UCF specifically targets place-bound transfer students for its fully-online undergraduate degrees through UCF Online. In its first year, UCF Online nearly doubled enrollment expectations with 1,680 students. Through UCF Online, the institution has developed partnerships with institutions across the state to provide seamless transition for community college students to a four-year degree at UCF.

Advising Partnership Grows Transfer Enrollments

UCF Transfer Enrollments

6

partner
community
colleges

7,907

3,956

2005   2016

3,900

Increase in transfer
student enrollment
since the start of
DirectConnect
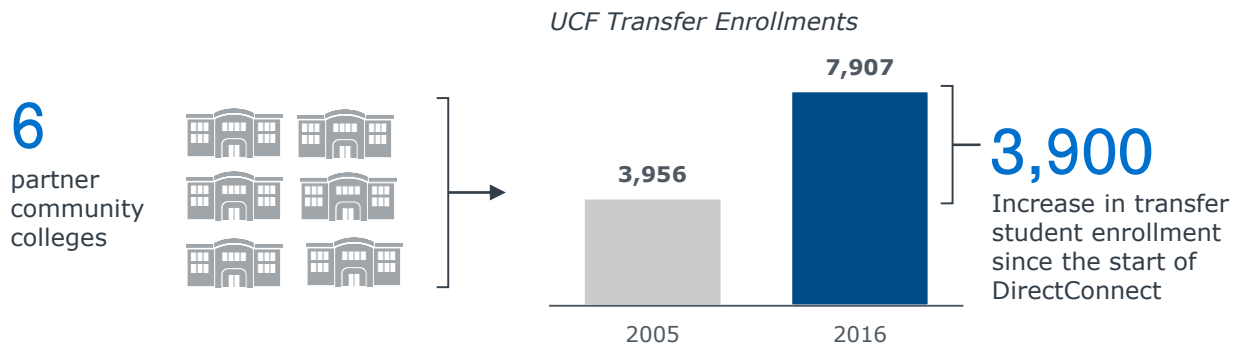
UCF Online Caters Primarily to Transfer and Graduate Students

1,680

Students enrolled in
UCF Online in the
first year, nearly
double enrollment
expectations

20

Fully-online
undergraduate degree
programs offered

eab.com

Degree Completers Automatically at Higher Risk
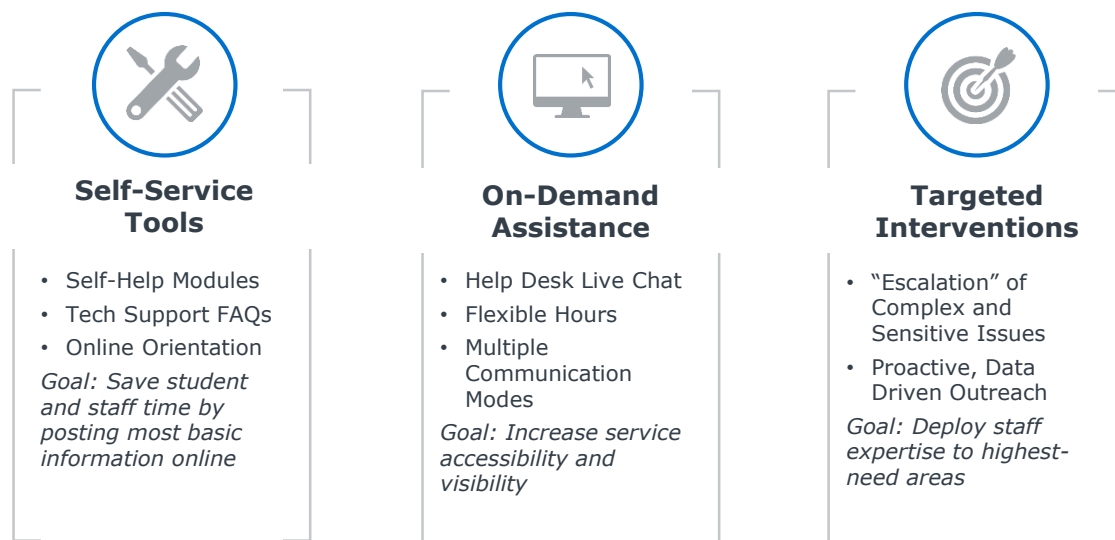
Students Need Additional Support to Persist and Complete

As in the case of any fully online student, access to student support services that match the modality of instruction is key to success. However, this is particularly important for degree completers who may have been outside the higher education space for many years and who may also be unfamiliar with the strategies necessary for successful online learning. There are many individuals on campus who can support adult and online student persistence, often at much lower cost than hiring full-time professional advisors or partnering with a third-party provider.

Self-Service Tools

- Self-Help Modules
- Tech Support FAQs
- Online Orientation

Goal: Save student and staff time by posting most basic information online

On-Demand Assistance

- Help Desk Live Chat
- Flexible Hours
- Multiple Communication Modes

Goal: Increase service accessibility and visibility

Targeted Interventions

- "Escalation" of Complex and Sensitive Issues
- Proactive, Data Driven Outreach

Goal: Deploy staff expertise to highest-need areas

For more details about supporting online adult students, see "Charting a Path to Persistence: Strategic Interventions for Adult and Online Learners" on eab.com

EAB research on adult and online student success, Charting a Path to Persistence: Strategic Interventions for Adult and Online Learners, provides best practices that support adult student retention and persistence. These tactics help institutions monitor financial and academic stop-out risk among their students and include strategies to encourage re-enrollment and facilitate completion.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

eab.com

Proceed With Caution

Key Myths About Competency-Based Education

Across higher education there has been increasing hype surrounding competency-based education (CBE), with particular focus on supporting adult students. In theory, proponents believe that CBE would effectively account for the diverse experiences of adult students by providing credit for competencies (as opposed to seat time). However, in reality CBE is not the silver-bullet for personalized learning.

Myth: Students and employers are demanding CBE

Reality: Students are not shopping for institutions based on CBE offerings and employer involvement in CBE programs has been minimal

Myth: CBE is faster and lower cost for students

Reality: Students must progress at faster-than-realistic pace to achieve cost savings. This is particularly challenging for adult degree completers

Myth: CBE is lower cost for institutions

Reality: Essential proactive advising services, need for manual data reporting, and registration processes increase institutional costs

For more information please see "Three Myths About Competency-Based Education" on eab.com

Currently few students know what CBE is and are not specifically selecting degree programs based on whether it offers CBE. Similarly, contrary to popular belief, CBE is not lower cost for students and institutions. In order for students to save money on the CBE subscription programs[1], they would need to have the time, self-discipline, and academic readiness to complete more than one or two courses per term. For many students, especially adult degree completers, this is not a reasonable expectation which limits the possibility of cost savings. Moreover, as online learning technology has not developed enough to accommodate the needs of CBE program management, institutions need to develop new in-house capabilities which significantly increases costs.

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1) Subscription models allows students to enroll in as many classes as they would like for a flat fee per term.

Personalized Learning At Scale and Within Reach

Effective Prior Learning Assessments Can Be a Low-Risk Alternative to CBE

For institutions interested in incorporating personalized learning into their curriculum, prior learning assessments (PLA) are an effective alternative to CBE. Studies show that students who earn PLA credit graduate faster and at higher rates than their peers. But students often encounter a series of institutional obstacles that make it difficult to earn PLA credit. By creating a single webpage with centralized information about PLA policies and eligibility, institutions can ensure that students have access to the necessary information about existing procedures.

Three Keys for Success

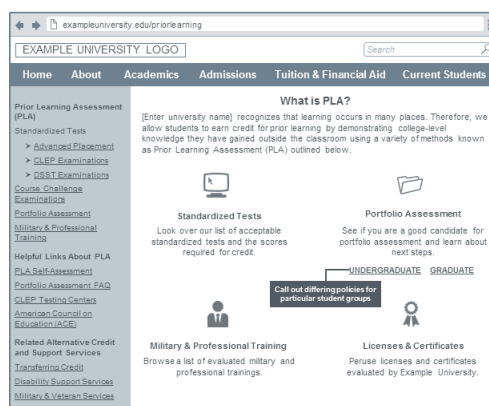Make information about PLA eligibility clear and easily accessible

Assign students a single point of contact

Offer faculty training to support consistent credit awards

Sample PLA Web Page Template from *The PLA Playbook*

For details about implementing CBE and PLA, please see "The CBE and PLA Playbook: Tools for Alternative Credit Programs" on eab.com

Similarly, assigning a single institution-wide point of contact can ensure that students are not discouraged from pursuing PLA credit by a multilayered and confusing approval processes. Students can easily miss out on PLA credit if faculty don't understand what does and doesn't count as prior learning, the process to award credit, and the criteria to assess prior learning. Training sessions for faculty can prevent inconsistent credit awards.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Advisors to Our Work

This resource drew on a ten year history of research on online education. EAB is grateful to the individuals and organizations that have shared their insights, analysis, and time with us over the years. We would especially like to recognize the following individuals for being particularly generous with their time and expertise during our recent updates.

Barbara Bichelmeyer
University of Missouri,
Kansas City
Kansas City, Missouri

Tom Cavanaugh
University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Rich Hancuff
Misericordia University
Dallas, Pennsylvania

Darcy Hardy
Blackboard Inc.
Washington, D.C.

Dave King
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon

Jason Lemon
University of Cincinnati
Cincinatti, Ohio

Patrick Lyons
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario

Kristi Nelson
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Cincinatti, Ohio

Javier Reyes
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

Kim Siegenthaler
University of Missouri, Columbia
Columbia, Missouri

Linda Sullivan
University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Andre Watts
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Diana Wu
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