

Understanding and Recruiting Adult Degree Completers

Insights for Enrollment Leaders from a Survey of 1,000+ Prospective Adult Degree Completers

Adult Learner Recruitment



Executive Summary

The Challenges—and Opportunities—of Recruiting Adult Degree Completers

Even prior to the coronavirus pandemic, enrollment leaders were seeking to grow enrollment in adult-serving programs to mitigate expected revenue loss from declines in first-time, full-time undergraduate enrollments. As the pandemic continues to destabilize the US economy and reinvigorate concerns about meeting enrollment and revenue goals, enrollment leaders are facing renewed pressure to recruit adult learners. One specific population of interest is adult degree completers, or **students 25 and older who have some college credit but do not yet have a bachelor's degree**.

Today, there are 3.5 million "potential degree completers" in the United States, or adults who have completed at least two years' worth of academic credit but do not have a bachelor's degree or certificate. While enrollment trends in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic remain to be seen, the nearly 33% increase in bachelor's program enrollment among adults 25 and older in the wake of the Great Recession (i.e., 2007 to 2011) suggests degree completer enrollment may grow in the face of new economic uncertainty.

However, recruiting adult degree completers comes with a host of challenges that differ from the challenges of recruiting traditional undergraduate students or other even other adult learners. From identifying prospective degree completers despite the lack of test-taker lists to implementing best-fit marketing strategies during students' long, meandering journey to reenrollment, recruiting degree completers requires thoughtful marketing across the enrollment funnel. To better engage and recruit prospective adult degree completers, it is critical to understand who comprises this population, their motivations and fears, and the obstacles they face in reenrollment.

Understanding Today's Adult Degree Completers

To help our partners better understand and recruit degree completers, **EAB collaborated with The Center for Generational Kinetics**² **to interview and survey more than 1,000 prospective adult degree completers**. Survey results shed light on degree completers' mindset, program and institutional preferences, and barriers to enrollment. This white paper will explore three key findings from the survey and offer specific marketing, recruitment, and program design strategies to enroll and serve adult degree completers.

For more information about survey methodology, please see page 18.

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"I want to be an inspiration to others. I want to show people that 'you can do it.' Finish what you started. It doesn't matter if you're 25 or 50. If you want to do something you can make it happen."

Female Respondent, Texas

77

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *Some College, No Degree.* 2009; EAB research and analysis.

The National Student Clearinghouse defines "potential degree completers" as individuals with at least two years' worth of academic progress, as these individuals are most likely to finish their degree.

²⁾ For more information about The Center for Generational Kinetics, please see page 18 of this report.

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Adult Degree Completers' Mindset, Motivations, and Concerns

Degree Completers Are Motivated by Personal Betterment but Limited by Fears

SECTION

Opportunity Inspires Degree Completers

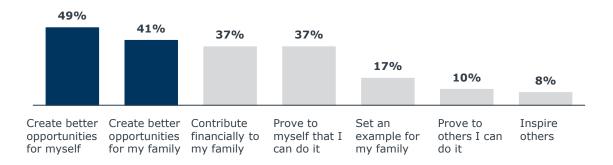
For Many, Degree Completion Signals Personal and Professional Accomplishment

In many ways, degree completers represent an ideal prospective student audience for enrollment leaders. They are a highly motivated group, for whom leaving school was a sacrifice, often made to focus on work or family. Respondents say that even considering returning to school to complete their degree is made possible by changes in their circumstances, personal growth, or a combination of the two.

Across the board, survey respondents identify a college degree as an important step to securing new and better opportunities for themselves and their families, as indicated in the chart below. "Better opportunities" range from improved job prospects and higher earning potential to more free time and flexibility.

Figure 1: Degree Completers Seek Opportunity for Themselves and Their Families

Q: What are your top motivations for wanting to finish your degree?



Personal Growth and a Desire to Inspire Others Motivate Degree Completers

For many survey respondents, completing their degree is not only a personal accomplishment but also an accomplishment for their family and their community. A four-year degree can signify their hard work, aptitude, and persistence. Thirty-seven percent of respondents want to go back to school to prove to themselves they can complete their degree, while 17% seek to set an example for their family.



"The primary reason [I want to complete my degree] is to be an example to my kids....There's nobody in my family who has completed school up to now. Why not me? Maybe I'll be the first."

Male Respondent, Pennsylvania

99

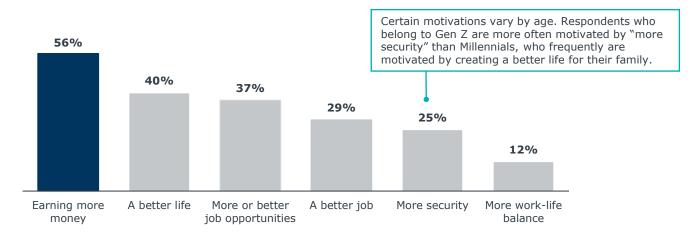
Income and Job Options Are Top Motivators

For Most Respondents, More Money Is the Greatest Benefit of a College Degree

While a sense of accomplishment is a key reason respondents want to complete their degree, the personal economic impact of a four-year degree is the most common motivator among respondents. More than half of respondents identify "earning more money" as the top benefit of a four-year degree, and with good reason, as data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that professionals with a bachelor's degree have 40% higher median weekly earnings than professionals with some college credit but no degree.¹

Figure 2: Increased Earnings Cited as the Top Benefit of Degree Completion

Q: What do you see as the biggest benefits that would come from earning your degree?

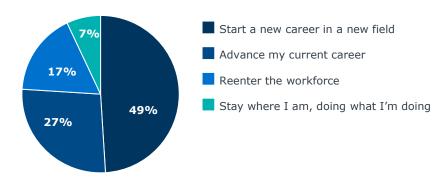


Degree Completers View a Four-Year Degree as a Career Catapult

In an uncertain economy, a four-year degree represents a critical step in career change or advancement for many prospective degree completers. Nearly 80% of respondents believe "a four-year degree ensures a wider selection of job options." About half of respondents seek a four-year degree to kick-start a career in a new field, while 27% hope to advance in their current career. Regardless of their career goals, respondents seek a four-year degree as proof of knowledge and ability for employers. Some respondents report employers overlook their existing professional experience because they do not hold a four-year degree.

Figure 3: Respondents Most Often Seek Career Change

Q: What kind of career move would you make with a college degree?



Source: Elka Torpey, "Education pays," *Career Outlook,* U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2019; The Center for Generational Kinetics.

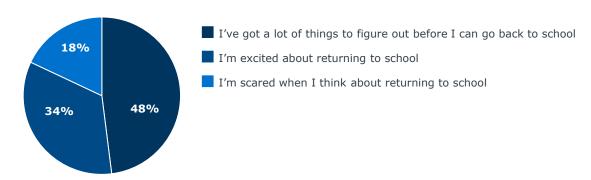
Finances Are a Motivator but Also a Limitation

Motivated by Possibility but Concerned About the Realities of Daily Life

From being given new job opportunities to inspiring their children, prospective degree completers are motivated to go back to school by a range of factors. But degree completers are also apprehensive about returning to school. On average, respondents spent 20 more seconds sharing their concerns in video interviews than they did discussing their motivations. Nearly half of respondents say they have much to figure out before they can reenroll, while 18% say they are "scared when they think about returning to school."

Figure 4: Apprehension About Returning to School Outweighs Excitement

Q: How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

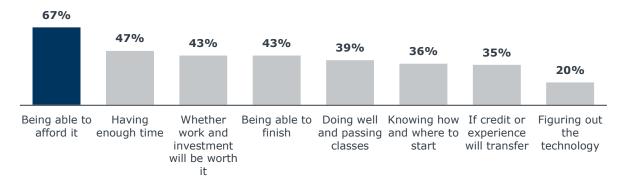


Program Cost Looms Large for Many Prospective Degree Completers

While new job opportunities and higher pay motivate respondents to complete their degree, finances are also a limiting factor for many prospective degree completers. Two-thirds of respondents identify "being able to afford it" as their top concern about returning to school. While lost wages and childcare costs also weigh on prospective degree completers, 72% of respondents identify the cost of tuition, fees, and books as the most challenging financial aspect of completing their degree.

Figure 5: Affordability Is the Top Concern Among Respondents

Q: How concerning are these factors when you think about returning to school?



Cost is also an area of uncertainty. More than half of respondents are unsure how much it will cost to finish their degree. Forty-nine percent of respondents plan to pay for their degree in part with grants and scholarships, and 40% plan to take out loans.

Fear Often Hinders Reenrollment

Time Required to Complete a Degree Can Be Daunting to Prospective Students

As prospective degree completers weigh the pros and cons of returning to school, they must consider how classes and homework would fit into busy work and family schedules. Almost half of respondents, many of whom are parents and hold at least one job, identify "having enough time" as a top concern about returning to school.

When asked which aspects of time to complete their degree are most concerning, 57% of respondents say the number of hours required weekly to finish their degree is the greatest challenge. Fifty-four percent of respondents express concern about whether classes will fit their schedules, while 51% say the number of semesters or years required to complete their degree is most concerning.

47%

of respondents identify "having enough time" as a top concern as they consider returning to school



"I work full-time. Many times I work overtime. I'm married. I have a 13-yearold son. Many times I have no time for myself. So how am I going to have time for school?"

Female Respondent, New York



Fear of Failure Can Overwhelm Prospective Degree Completers

In addition to concerns about cost and time commitment, prospective degree completers express a fear of failure and concerns about their ability to complete their degree. Most often, respondents fear being able to keep up with classmates and complete coursework successfully. Some respondents report becoming overwhelmed while researching programs and pausing their journey back to school altogether.

Figure 6: Degree Completers Fear Failure, Fitting In, and Keeping Up with Peers

Q: When you consider going back to college, what are your top concerns or main fears?



"The fear of failure. Fear of **getting overwhelmed**. Between going to school and going to work and not doing as well or failing. And then I'll be back to square one."

- Male Respondent, Pennsylvania



"Going into a classroom setting, I'm probably going to be the oldest person in the class, maybe even older than the teacher. **Am I going to be treated differently?**"

- Female Respondent, Texas



"My main concern would probably be being able to **keep up with today's pace**. School has changed so much since I was in attendance."

- Male Respondent, Pennsylvania



Adult Degree Completers' Program and Institutional Preferences

Degree Completers Prioritize Lifestyle Fit Above All

SECTION

2

Governed by Practicality

Degree Completers Seek a College Degree, Not an Educational Experience

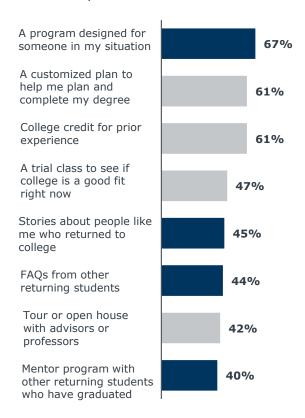
Although going back to school represents a significant personal milestone for many degree completers, respondents are highly practical throughout their journey to enrollment. Degree completers seek to complete their degree as quickly and inexpensively as possible. While degree completers value the community that can come with enrolling in an academic program, convenience trumps educational experience across the board.

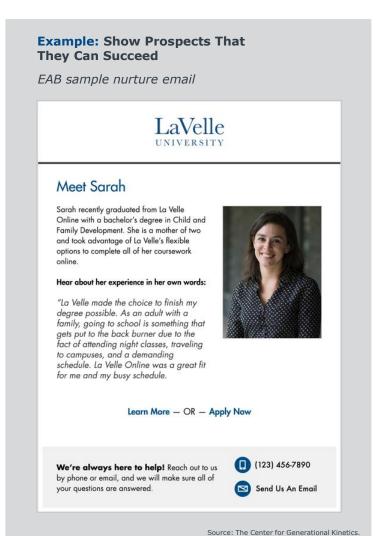
Respondents Crave Evidence That Students Like Them Are Enrolled—and Succeeding

Many respondents are apprehensive about how the unique experiences they bring to the classroom could differentiate them from traditional undergraduate students. As a result, respondents seek programs and institutions that enroll students like them. For many prospective degree completers, seeing other adult learners enrolled and succeeding—via testimonials, advertisements, or conversations with current students—also assuages concerns about their ability to complete their degree. Respondents express interest in opportunities to hear from and interact with other degree completers, as indicated in dark blue in the chart below.

Figure 7: Respondents Want to Know a Program Is Designed for Completers

Q: How influential would any of the following ideas be in your selection of a school?





Convenience Is Top Priority

"A Good Fit" Often Means an Online Program

Not only are online programs the preferred option for many respondents, but online courses are often perceived as the only option. Some respondents had not considered on-campus options and assumed their return to school would happen in an online classroom. More than 90% of respondents report they will most likely take courses that are offered online, while 69% say they seek a program that is mostly or completely online. Students who belong to Gen X show a slightly higher preference for online courses than do Millennials.



While other adult learner populations such as students enrolled in graduate or professional programs are increasingly apt to enroll in online programs at institutions outside of their immediate locality, adult degree completers exhibit a greater preference for online programs at institutions close to home. If students can visit campus, 48% of respondents report they will travel up to 30 minutes to attend class on campus.



"Online learning would be a lot more convenient for me...I just don't have enough time. And that's a huge thing for me, being able to do things on my own whenever I can."

Female Respondent, Tennessee

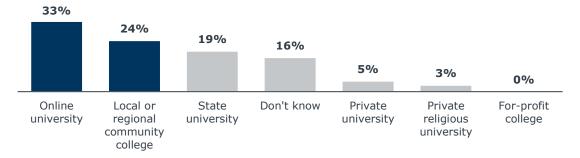


Personal Feasibility Is More Important Than School Ranking

Because degree completers seek flexible and lower-cost options when going back to school, respondents say they are most likely to enroll at an online-only institution or nearby regional community college. However, private institutions and other school types can expand their appeal to prospective degree completers by showcasing information that speaks to students' desire for flexible and affordable programming, such as information about financial aid opportunities or multiple start dates. Degree completers also express a preference to complete their degree at the institution where they enrolled initially, presenting an opportunity for schools to retarget students who left their institution.

Figure 8: Online Institutions and Community Colleges Appeal to Degree Completers³

Q: What type of college are you most likely to choose to finish your degree?



3) While only 5 of 1,010 survey respondents selected "for-profit college," we theorize that interest in for-profit institutions may be underrepresented, potentially due to students' lack of familiarity with the characteristics that classify an institution as "for-profit." In addition, interest in for-profit institutions may have been captured in the online or private university categories.

Source: The Center for Generational Kinetics.



Adult Degree Completers' Research Behavior and Catalysts to Enrollment

Degree Completers' Enrollment Journey Is Meandering—and Action Sporadic

SECTION

3

A Slow Journey to Reenrollment

Interest Is High, but Urgency Is Low

One of the greatest challenges facing enrollment leaders as they seek to recruit adult degree completers is prospective degree completers' long and often meandering journey back to school. Twenty-three percent of survey respondents do not yet have a timeline for when they will go back to school. For enrollment leaders, degree completers' slow journey back to school means marketing messages must strike a careful balance of driving urgency without alienating degree completers whose busy schedules and competing priorities may prohibit them from acting quickly.

Research Or Window-Shopping?

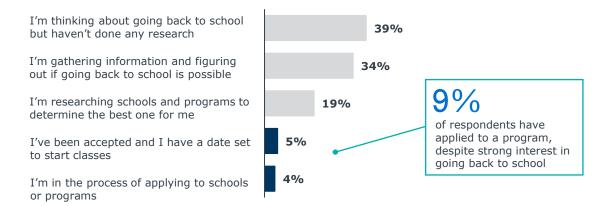
More than other adult learners, degree completers linger in a steady state of passive information-gathering, spending significant time in the "research" stage of their journey to enrollment. Respondents report they research academic programs and institutions sporadically and when convenient—and often without recording what they learn for future reference. Although 37% of respondents plan to go back to school within the next year, more than half of respondents say they are gathering information about going back to school generally or comparing programs.

The frequency of research varies significantly across survey respondents. About one-third of survey respondents research programs weekly, compared to 10% who research programs daily. Prospective degree completers who research schools and programs most often include male respondents, those living in urban areas, and (expectedly) respondents who are extremely interested in going back to school or plan to do so within the next year.

Respondents' relatively infrequent and inconsistent research patterns mean enrollment leaders have a small window of opportunity to capture degree completers' interest—and make an impression.

Figure 9: Few Respondents Have Taken Explicit Action Toward Enrollment

Q: Which of these statements best describes you?



Search Engines Have Never Been More Important

It All Starts with Search

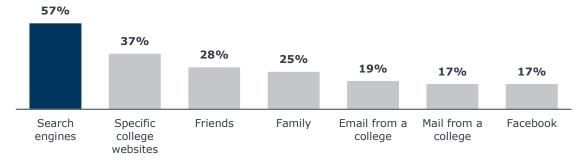
While family and friends often motivate respondents to pursue their degree, their influence on degree completers as they research programs is relatively minimal. Instead, adult degree completers rely primarily on search engines to learn more about going back to school. Respondents report searching for terms such as "online programs" or "colleges near me" to learn more. Paid search ads with messages tailored to degree completers' motivations and priorities are therefore one of the best ways to capture interest from students perusing programs.

Average monthly searches for the term "bachelor's degree," suggesting strong competition for search traffic

Unsurprisingly, the students most ready to go back to school are most likely to seek out information on college websites and college-owned social media where they can find answers to specific questions and information about next steps. While Millennials are more likely to research academic programs and schools via social media than members of Gen X, both groups express a degree of distrust in posts from social media connections about going back to school. Comparatively few students have sought out information about going back to school through third parties such as "top 100" lists, college billboards, or radio ads. Marketing investments on these channels may not yield a worthwhile return.

Figure 10: Respondents Rely on Search Engines to Learn More About Reenrollment

Q: Which of these sources have you used in the past year to gather information about returning to school?





Moving Beyond Research and Toward Enrollment

Degree Completers Collect Information Passively—Until the Right Moment Strikes

While prospective degree completers can spend months or years passively gathering information about going back to school, they are often prompted to pursue information about completing their degree actively when a major life event frees up time or money. Respondents typically begin to take more deliberate action toward enrollment, such as request information from a specific program, following the birth of a child, when their children leave home, or in times of discontent at their jobs. Most respondents say changes in their circumstances led them to go back to school, rather than industry or global changes.

Figure 11: Major Life Events Drive Respondents to Seek Information Actively

A closer look at degree completers' journey to reenrollment

Stage	Inspiration	Intention	Passive Research
Description	Recognizing a desire	Setting an intention	Gradually gathering information
Mindset	"I want a better paying job/better life."	"I want to go back to school."	"I actually want to go back to school."
Action	Dreaming	"I want to go back to school."	Sporadic, exploratory research
Questions	What else could I do? What would I make?	"I want to go back to school."	What are my options? How much will it cost?

Active research	Application
Investigation and comparison	Orchestration
"I'm ready now."	"I've chosen."
Request more info, family discussions	Gathering paperwork, completing application
Which option is right for me? How will I afford it?	What are the requirements? How do I apply for aid?

Equal Parts Soul-Searching and Researching

While enrollment leaders cannot predict when a major life event will lead prospective degree completers to research programs actively, understanding what factors stall degree completers in the research stage can inform the messages and tactics enrollment leaders use to accelerate the journey to enrollment.

Many respondents share that the amount of information available to them can be overwhelming. Survey respondents also say the inability to locate the information they need quickly and easily can be dismaying—if just finding more information about a program is difficult, how will I ever succeed in the program?

In either case, thoughtfully designed program webpages and marketing help prospects avoid these pitfalls. For example, a prominently displayed "frequently asked questions page" and nurture emails that link to need-to-know information such as program deadlines and admissions requirements give prospective degree completers the information they need in order to move toward enrollment.

Implications for Recruitment Strategy

At EAB, we work with more than 100 partners as part of our **Adult Learner Recruitment** initiative (see page 18). We combine intent marketing, market research, and strategic consulting to fuel smart growth for adult degree completion, graduate, and online programs. Our survey research, coupled with existing best practices and expertise, suggest the following strategies can help institutions better reach, recruit, and enroll adult degree completers.

Proactively Address Degree Completers' Concerns About Time to Completion and Cost

Survey respondents identify cost and time to completion as the most significant obstacles to enrollment—and the greatest unknowns. To address students' questions and assuage their concerns, ensure marketing messages across channels emphasize program affordability and flexibility. Include tuition, fees, and financial aid information clearly and prominently on program webpages. When possible, share estimates of weekly time commitments and highlight flexible program features, including online formats and multiple start dates. Consolidate key information about program cost and time to completion on a program FAQ page to minimize the time students spend searching for key program information.

Showcase Students with Similar Experiences in Marketing to Help Students Envision Themselves Enrolled and Succeeding

In addition to concerns about cost and time to completion, survey respondents are often apprehensive about their ability to keep pace in an academic program. Provide prospects with opportunities to see students with similar personal and professional experiences enrolled and succeeding in your program. For example, develop student testimonials and "nurture content" that showcase student stories. Use imagery in program advertisements that show students balancing many of the competing priorities degree completers must juggle, such as work and parenthood.

Q Leverage Paid Search and SEO to Reach Students Who Are Conducting Research

Prospective degree completers most often rely on search engines to research schools and academic programs. Prioritize paid search campaigns to reach prospects as they research programs. Ensure paid search ad copy includes information pertinent to degree completers, such as information about program flexibility and convenience. Because paid search ads can become costly, regularly assess budget allocation data to ensure paid search ads are generating a return on investment. Additionally, audit program webpages to confirm they are optimized to appear in top search results.

Enhance Nurture Content to Account for Degree Completers' Extended Research Phase

Our research indicates adult degree completers spend significant time researching academic programs prior to application and enrollment. To help move students from interest to enrollment, deploy nurture content that provides the information students need to take the next step. For example, include language that helps prospects feel supported throughout the awareness and consideration stages.

Implications for Program Development and Design

EAB's **Strategic Portfolio and Market Planning services** help partners identify, develop, and launch right-fit academic programs through customized labor market analysis, competitor research, and a review of your existing portfolio and enrollment goals. EAB goes beyond research to provide an in-depth activation plan and on-site workshops to bring your program and enrollment growth goals to fruition. For more information, see page 19.

Consider the following strategies when designing and launching programs for adult degree completers:

Develop Programs Based on Student and Employer Demand

Our research indicates prospective degree completers view a four-year degree as a gateway to new and better job opportunities. Prioritize the development of programs that confer skills sought by employers in your local and regional markets. Conduct rigorous analysis of job postings data and employment projections to ensure curricula evolve as industries and employers' needs change. Because students seek evidence that a four-year degree will bolster their careers, integrate labor market data into program marketing materials to help students envision the professional benefits of completing your program.

2 Audit Program Admissions Requirements to Avoid Unnecessary Hurdles for Degree Completers

Adult degree completers regularly consider how their personal and professional experiences differ from those of first-time, full-time traditional undergraduate students. Ensure your admissions requirements reflect the unique needs and experiences of prospective degree completers. For example, consider whether letters of recommendation from instructors are necessary for degree completers who may have been out of school for decades. Consider accepting degree completers' professional experience as academic credit and highlight credit transfer policies on program webpages to address students' concerns about time to completion. Ensure your application is user-friendly and optimized for mobile devices to make the application process as seamless as possible.

3 Benchmark Program Cost Against Local and Regional Competitors

Our research suggests cost is the most significant barrier to reenrollment for adult degree completers. Survey respondents prioritize affordable and convenient options when searching for the best-fit program. Identify similar programs that enroll degree completers and calculate total program cost based on available tuition and fees information. Consider peer program cost when pricing programs for adult degree completers and ensure prospective students can locate program cost on your website easily.

About the Study

Overview of the Research and Survey Methodology

EAB's Adult Learner Recruitment initiative partnered with The Center for Generational Kinetics, a generational research and consulting firm, to conduct a two-part research study to learn more about adult degree completers. Topics explored included prospective degree completers' motivations for going back to school, sources used to gather information about programs, institution and program preferences, and key decision criteria. The data showcased in this report comes from video interviews and survey responses from 1,040 participants. These findings also reflect insights from EAB research based on partnerships with 100+ institutions serving adult learners.

Phase 1: Video Interviews to Understand Student Mindset

EAB and The Center for Generational Kinetics posed 25 interview questions to 30 US participants with some college credit and who indicated they were open to continuing their postsecondary education at a four-year college or university. Participants answered survey questions via user-generated video.

Participant Profile

Gender	Percentage
Female	60%
Male	40%
Other	0%

Age ¹	Percentage
Millennial	47%
Gen X	47%
Other	1%

Phase 2: Survey to Understand the Adult Degree Completer Enrollment Journey

To build on and quantify the qualitative insights surfaced in Phase 1, EAB and The Center for Generational Kinetics deployed a 25-question survey to 1,010 US participants who have some college credit but do not yet have a four-year degree.

Participant Profile

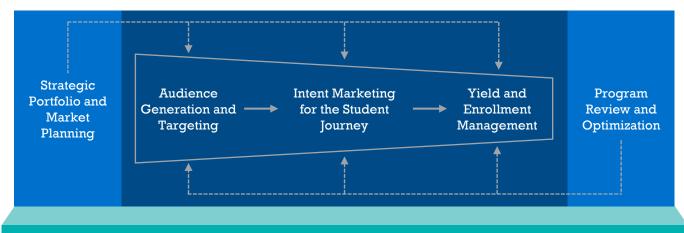
Gender	Percentage
Female	59%
Male	41%
Other	0%

Age ¹	Percentage
Millennial	77%
Gen X	23%
Other	0%

 [&]quot;Millennials" are defined as individuals born between 1977 and 1995. "Gen X" includes individuals born between 1965 and 1976.

Introducing EAB's Adult Learner Recruitment

A Strategic Enrollment Solution to Fuel Growth in Degree Completion Programs



DATA & CONSUMER ANALYTICS AT SCALE



Strategic Portfolio and Market Planning

We provide rich market intelligence via our Professional and Adult Education Forum that synthesizes real-time labor market data with a variety of sources, including research interviews and enrollment conferral data. Our reports lead with actionable recommendations to help you validate demand, answer critical marketing and curriculum questions, and accelerate program development efforts.



Audience Generation and Targeting

We help you expand your reachable audience to ensure that you can contact as many potential right-fit students as possible, early in their journey. Drawing from first-party digital platforms and your institution's inquiry pool, our targeting analysts help you optimize search parameters and define your markets to ensure that you maximize your reach.



Intent Marketing for the Student Journey

We engage prospective students at every stage of their journey from awareness to application.

- ▶ Paid Search Management: We develop paid search campaigns to reach the growing number of adult degree completers who rely on search engines to research academic programs. We provide strategic recommendations for ad strategy, design, and execution as part of a larger multichannel strategy for greatest impact across the enrollment funnel.
- ▶ **Multichannel Engagement Strategy:** We design custom campaigns at scale according to student intent. These campaigns incorporate micro-surveys, responsive landing pages, behavioral campaign flows, data-informed creative, and a streamlined application experience.



Yield and Enrollment Management

We deploy a proprietary survey-based approach to help you determine accepted students' intentions, predict which students will enroll, and triage your outreach.



Program Review and Optimization

We conduct rigorous testing and research on an ongoing basis to identify highest-impact industry practices and maximize your results. We provide resources to help your organization plan for growth, and we evaluate marketing campaign performance to adjust strategy and optimize results.

To learn more about how EAB can help you recruit and enroll adult degree completers, email JocelynPowers@eab.com or visit eab.com/ALR.



We help schools support students

from enrollment to graduation and beyond



> ROOTED IN RESEARCH

7,500⁺ Peer-tested best practices

500+ Enrollment innovations tested annually

(>) ADVANTAGE OF SCALE

1,700⁺ Institutions served

4 M⁺ Students supported by our SSMS

> WE DELIVER RESULTS

95% Of our partners continue with us year after year, reflecting the goals we achieve together

