



# Is Your College Designed for Post-Traditional Learners?

13 Strategies to Ensure You Aren't Underserving Today's Community College Student



# EAB's Community College Offerings

Whether through best practice research, technology, or consulting services, our 650+ researchers, consultants, engineers, and data scientists work with members every day to make higher education smarter.

## Best Practice Research

The **Community College Executive Forum** provides research and advisory services for community college presidents and the entire executive cabinet.



**Strategic Guidance:** From national meetings to webconferences to on-site presentations, we make it easy to engage with our research.



**On-Demand Best Practices:** Our online resource library ensures you have the information you need, when you need it.



**Change Management Resources:** Move from insight to action with our implementation guides, benchmarking tools, and templates.

### Research Topics Include:

- Marketing and outreach
- Developmental education
- Student equity
- Workforce development
- Strategic planning
- Financial feasibility

## Technology and Services

**Navigate** is a comprehensive student success management system designed to help schools proactively manage student success.



**For Administrators:** Unlock the power of data analytics to surface real-time insights and student success intelligence.



**For Faculty and Staff:** Create a coordinated network of support for every student, enabling targeted intervention and proactive care.



**For Students:** Provide curated, intelligent guidance at the most pivotal moments, simplifying the student journey to completion.

### Service Support Includes:

- Facilitated kickoff
- Strategy formation
- Implementation support

1500+

Interviews with staff, administrators, and students

50+

Publications, toolkits, and expert presentations

475M+

Student course records in our analytics data set

2.5M+

Students supported across our member institutions

## The Adult Learner Enrollment Challenge Is About More Than Just the Economy

Since the peak of the recession, community colleges have experienced steady declines in enrollment of adult learners. While two-year public colleges lost 980,956 learners over the age of 25, public four-year colleges lost just 10,113.<sup>1</sup> In other words, for every 1 student over the age of 25 lost by public four-year colleges, two-year public colleges lost 97. Experts agree that these declines are in response to the improved economy: students flooded community college classrooms during the recession to upskill or retrain for new careers, and today's strong labor market has led to complacency about the need to prepare for the next economic downturn. However, this correlation overlooks the real issue: in times of economic prosperity, **adult learners don't see the value proposition of attending college.**

Today's students face a precarious balance of academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Student stop-outs since the recession demonstrate that the challenges of continued enrollment outweigh the benefits of completing their academic goals. To demonstrate the value of community college attendance during economic upswings, colleges must **respond to student motivations and challenges** in order to show learners that college enrollment is feasible alongside their other responsibilities and will make them less vulnerable to crisis during the next recession.

To achieve this goal, community colleges will need to adapt to the needs of prospective and stopped-out students. EAB is committed to helping you solve this challenge. The purpose of this white paper is to provide a fresh perspective on **how to retain post-traditional learners by addressing their real motivation: a promising career.** To better understand how to engage and retain these students, it is critical to understand who comprises this population, the challenges they face, and their motivations. This paper will also offer specific strategies for integrating students' career goals from application to graduation by ensuring students are in the right program of study, making student services more accessible, and aligning curricula with student goals and the expectations of local labor markets.

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“ It's been harder for me. Being a mom, being a wife, being a worker, supporter—everything to finish up at [my college]. As an adult, it's harder.”

Post-Traditional Learner



## SECTION **01**

# Post-Traditional Is Today's Student



## Magnitude of Concern

Today's students don't have a singular focus on college.

No one who works for a community college needs to be told that the traditional image of an 18-year-old student who is dependent on his or her parents is less common now than in the past. Instead, students are older, more likely to attend part-time, have their own families, and work.



No Longer 18-Year-Olds

33%

Over 25 years of age<sup>2</sup>



Take Longer to Graduate

83%

Enroll part-time at some point<sup>3</sup>



Have Families of Their Own

30%

Parenting students<sup>4</sup>



Need to Pay the Bills

68%

Work while enrolled<sup>5</sup>

These myriad characteristics make it difficult to pinpoint the exact student population we are referring to when we speak of those students who tend to be highly career-driven but still in need of support.

Common Terms for Post-Traditional Students	Flaw
Adult	Traditional-aged students are also over the age of 18
Nontraditional	Nontraditional seems like a misnomer when NCES <sup>6</sup> reports 70% of today's students possess nontraditional characteristics
Part-time	Over 50% of full-time community college students juggle work responsibilities <sup>7</sup> with their enrollment
Employees who study	Overlooks those who identify as students first but still juggle work and/or family responsibilities
Independent students	Close, but overlooks dependent students who completed GED or adult high school programs

Perhaps the simplest definition comes from the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, which noted that **current college enrollment includes 15% of students who are between ages 17 and 21, attending four-year colleges, and living on campus. "The remaining 85% are considered 'post-traditional.'"**<sup>8</sup> In fact, if we add to that number individuals who would qualify for postsecondary education but aren't enrolled, there are over 90 million prospective students who lack a postsecondary credential.<sup>9</sup>

## Challenges Abound for Post-Traditional Learners

Post-traditional students represent a break from the population that many colleges were designed to serve. They have many competing priorities to balance, yet they find colleges designed with traditional-aged students in mind. Classes aren't available when students need them, and they're penalized when they have to miss class for commitments such as caring for a sick child at home or a shift change at work. They may be struggling to secure basic needs such as housing or food, and they often feel like they have little support on campus. Their paths may feel nearly endless due to necessary part-time enrollment and programs with few milestones to celebrate progress along the way. And finally, these students often bring a wealth of experiences that too often go unrecognized for college credit.



Limited **after-hours**  
class schedules  
and services



Penalties for  
**absences**



Programs lack  
**milestone**  
credentials



Little **basic**  
**needs** support



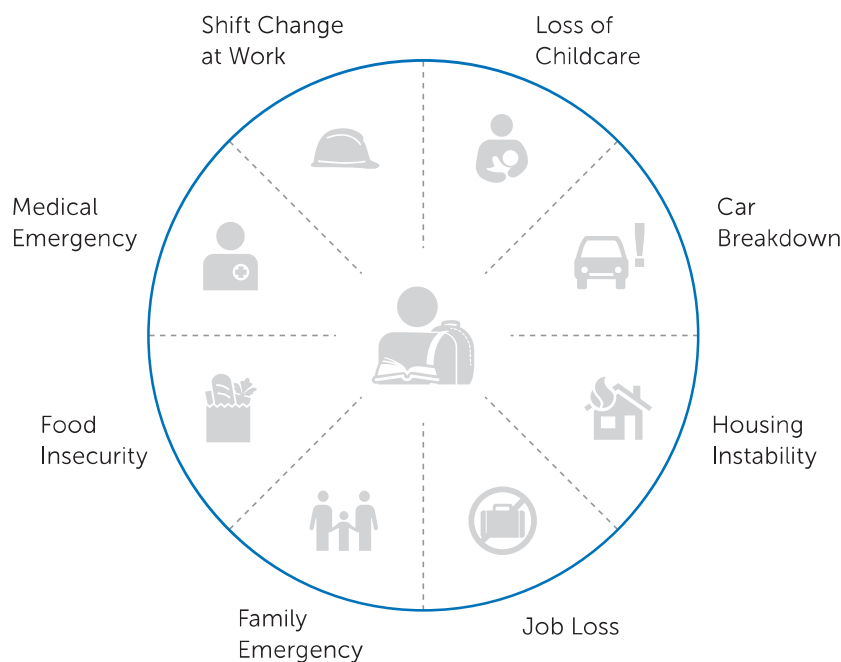
Minimal credit for  
**past experiences**

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“ We have to work out not just my [course and work] schedule..., but my schedule and my son's schedule and [my wife's course and work] schedule....And address obstacles like SNAP, obstacles like TANF—just financial obstacles that we've had lately.”

Post-Traditional Learner

What's more, post-traditional students are also more likely to have an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0 and high levels of unmet need, necessitating a balance of work with their academic and personal responsibilities. Unfortunately, **the balance struck is often more precarious than they anticipate** because there is little capacity to absorb common obstacles that occur in everyday life.

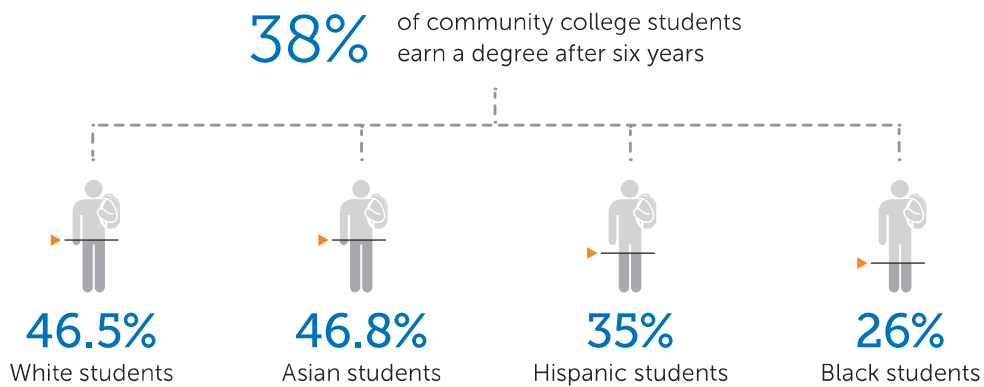


When personal or professional responsibilities change, post-traditional learners' attention appropriately turns to those priorities. And for low-income students, problems may take longer to correct, because money is too tight to quickly fix a car or pay for a new babysitter.

While new students may have envisioned giving comparable effort to their family, work, and academics, for most students, these three priorities simply are not created equal. **Academics will nearly always lose to family and professional responsibilities.** In fact, among those students who left college, 56% say the need to work full-time prevents their return to higher education, and 53% say family responsibilities keep them from reenrolling.<sup>10</sup> To retain post-traditional learners, we must give them information and tools they need to help manage this balance.



The post-traditional student population is vast, and these learners are more likely to attend community colleges than four-year schools. **Post-traditional students represent the changing face of higher education today.** Colleges are increasingly racially diverse, have students from all income levels, and include special populations such as parenting students and veterans, but current data suggests colleges are not serving these students well. Just 37.5% of community college students will earn a degree after six years, and completion rates are heavily correlated to race.<sup>11</sup> This is especially concerning because EAB analysis suggests that **from fall 2017 forward, public two-year institutions will enroll more minority students than white students.**<sup>12</sup>



In order for post-traditional students to fulfill their goals and for community colleges to increase enrollment and outcomes, colleges must **demonstrate the relevance of students' college experience to their career goals.** The following sections of this paper will highlight strategies from community colleges across the United States and provide specific examples of the importance of self-exploration in career advising, opportunities to adapt the college to the needs of post-traditional students, and more accessible employment preparation.



## SECTION **02**

# Importance of **Early Career Advising**



## Varied Career Motivations Necessitate Different Advising Approaches

In order to better serve post-traditional learners, it is essential to explore why they attend college. According to the American Council on Education (ACE), there are five common factors among post-traditional learners. These students:

- 1 Need to work to support themselves or their families;
- 2 Balance work and learning, combining or moving between them frequently;
- 3 Pursue knowledge, skills, and credentials that employers demand and compensate;
- 4 May require developmental education in order to succeed in college-level courses; and
- 5 Seek academic/career advising to navigate their complex path to a credential.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, most post-traditional learners pursue higher education to benefit their careers, rather than being driven by innate curiosity or in quest of critical thinking. However, different drivers affect their academic choices, making it essential for advisors to understand students' motivations for attending college to support their individual needs.

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“ I was in the same line of business for five years. Working twelve to fifteen hours a day wasn't unusual, and that's, like, labor—it's labor intensive. You're constantly picking up a lot of weight, dragging stuff back and forth, and you're always on your feet. The whole time, there's no sitting down, you're always on your feet. [And I began to think], maybe I should explore other options.”

Post-Traditional Learner

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## ADVISING POST-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS BASED ON THEIR MOTIVATION

	Upskilling at Work 	Facing Replacement 	Preparing for a Switch 	Returning to Workforce 
<b>Goal</b>	Aiming for a promotion	Trying to stay ahead of technology shifts	Searching for a new passion	Seeking to refresh outdated skills
<b>Strategy</b>	Wants to learn the latest career-relevant competencies	Wants to acquire in-demand skills	Wants to explore various opportunities	Wants to land a job in a growing field
<b>Key Statements to Listen for in Advising</b>	"I need new skills to keep up and reach the next step"	"I need to learn how to make myself invaluable"	"I'm ready to transition to something new, but need to learn more"	"I want to take advantage of local opportunities"
<b>Career Advising Intensity</b>	Minimal	Significant	Moderate to Significant	Moderate
<b>Benefits from Integration of Workforce and Credit Stackable Credentials</b>	Significant	Moderate to Significant	Moderate	Significant
<b>Probability of Eligibility for Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)</b>	Significant	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
<b>Benefits from Online Career Data/Assessment</b>	Moderate	Significant	Significant	Significant

Once advisors better understand the motivations and needs of post-traditional advisees, the advisor can build upon what students already know in order to give them a clearer understanding of their programs of study, academic requirements, and intended career outcomes. Complete College America, in partnership with select higher education organizations, recently published a report<sup>11</sup> on the importance of beginning college with a clear sense of purpose. They highlight data that indicates the value students place on getting a good job and suggest the following approach to career advising.

1



The college must help students realize that college is an opportunity for self-discovery, aligning interests to opportunities, and making informed choices about their career aspirations.

2



Students should have numerous built-in opportunities to explore professional pathways.

3



Students should have access to data and insights from peers and leaders in their field of choice.

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“ In my career, it’s just been hard to see other people that were making more money than I was even though I have 25 years’ experience in the field. But I don’t have that degree.”

Post-Traditional Learner

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#### RETENTION STRATEGY 1

### Self-directed early career assessment

Too often, advisors have limited time with their students. To make the most of each advising appointment, it is beneficial to encourage students to arrive with some of the work done. Advisors can encourage students to complete career interest and skills inventories as well as explore independently leading up to their in-person advising meeting. Users of student success management systems such as EAB's technology often use the platform to nudge students to complete in-app major exploration. This allows students to explore at their own pace and review key information such as careers that reflect interests, skills, and values. This self-directed exploration provides students with valuable insights to use their first advising appointment to their best advantage.

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#### RETENTION STRATEGY 2

### Tools for informed decision-making

Students need data about their programs of study and career choices before they begin on a path that could require repeated coursework if they change their minds. In other words, if your college uses meta-majors that allow students to fluidly transition across related programs, this program exploration could be delayed until the first term of courses. However, if programs have unique coursework that cannot be applied easily to other programs of studies, students must be encouraged to investigate their chosen fields prior to enrollment.

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“ Too many students are spending too much time and money on a degree that does not align with their career aspirations.”<sup>14</sup>

Complete College America

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### RETENTION STRATEGY 3

## Road maps for the future, planned with realistic expectations

Oftentimes, students have an incomplete understanding of their path toward graduation. They may be unaware of opportunities for credit for prior learning, effects of part-time enrollment on time-to-degree, or important program requirements. This confusion can lead to frustration, discouragement, and even stop-out. In order to provide students with information at appropriate times, advisors need to proactively engage students to share critical information. These interactions have the added benefit of building rapport between the advisor and student. Academic advisors and administrators can use Navigate to poll students on a variety of topics that can inform them about critical information and set expectations on countless topics:

- Postgraduation plans
- Expected enrollment pace
- Potential opportunities for credit for prior learning
- Anticipated graduation dates
- Misaligned career and program goals
- To connect students with additional resources to validate their decisions

Student responses can indicate a need to reinforce need-to-know information, direct students to resources, or discuss alternative educational opportunities.



In a recent survey of EAB's community college membership,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of respondents indicated they were restructuring noncredit and credit programs to prompt more flexible program innovation. Building a crosswalk between noncredit and credit programs is no easy feat, but **Pueblo Community College** has committed to expanding credit for prior learning. To minimize complications, they began the process by focusing on programs with straightforward articulation: those that led to industry certification. Noncredit and credit instructors reviewed and compared course competencies to determine which noncredit courses could be articulated for credit.

In the future, Pueblo plans to personalize outreach to noncredit students to recruit more of their noncredit students into credit programs. The crosswalk initiative has had a positive effect on Pueblo's credit for prior learning awards as well as completion rates.

Since the college launched the crosswalk, 38% more students have been awarded credit for prior learning. These students are nearly twice as likely to complete as students who don't earn any credit for prior learning. This suggests that the momentum students gain from credit for prior learning drives them toward completion.



These first three practices allow for independent exploration and just-in-time engagement with advisors during the start of post-traditional learners' enrollment. These interactions are intended to empower students with confidence in their decisions and direction before their first meeting with their advisors. Similarly, advisors can use the data they receive from students to direct attention where it is most needed and ensure students are on the right track from their first course.

Much like traditional students, post-traditional students must investigate their programs of study, career options, and credentials necessary to succeed in that career. However, they also need information about prior learning assessment and short-term credentials to get them fast-tracked toward their academic and professional goals. **Integrating these retention strategies builds student confidence that they are on the right track to achieve their goals and establishes rapport between students and advisors that contributes to a sense of belonging.**

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“ Everybody...has a dream, you know, to have your own place; have your own food; be able to have money to get all that stuff. I'm going to college because I want to have my own stuff....We just want to get out of this living situation that we're living in now, especially with government assistance. We are really tired of depending on that.”

Post-Traditional Learner

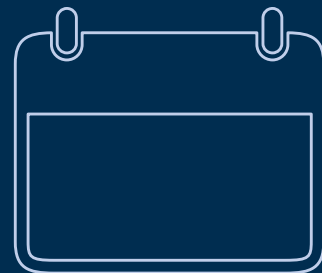
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## SECTION **03**

# Adapting the College to **Working Students**



Developing purposeful (rather than transactional) relationships with advisors from the beginning of students' enrollment creates an important bond that can build confidence and also provide momentum toward, and validate, students' career and program decisions. **Faculty and administrative practices also play an integral role in post-traditional students' sense of belonging.**

As discussed in Section 1, post-traditional students often struggle to balance their professional, personal, and academic demands. Too often, academic demands will be the first to suffer, because these priorities are siloed in students' lives, and it can seem as though certain priorities must take precedence at critical times. But what would happen if community college practices were more responsive to the needs of working students?



#### RETENTION STRATEGY 4

### Services that engage off-campus students

Working students often struggle to access academic and student services, as operational hours occur during times they can't be on campus, leaving post-traditional learners without support services they need. Just as we must schedule courses when students are available, we need to create responsive service models that expand access and effectiveness for post-traditional learners.



In 2010, **Northern Virginia Community College** scaled its virtual advising service to reach more post-traditional learners. Originally a pilot used only during peak enrollment periods, virtual advising is now available year-round. Students can log on to chat with an academic advisor live during their lunch hour at work (services are available from 10:30 am–2:30 pm) or when they get home from work (live chat resumes from 6 pm to 8 pm). This practice scales easily, because trained advisors can typically manage two to four conversations simultaneously. If students don't need to chat with an advisor, they can request help via email and are guaranteed a 24-hour response time. Similar services are available for enrollment, financial aid, and the college records office.

“Feedback from our students who use virtual advising is overwhelmingly positive! They appreciate the flexible hours, responsiveness, and expertise of our advisors. The testimonials just keep on coming!”

Dr. Beth Harper,  
Associate Vice-President for Student Services  
and Enrollment Management, Northern Virginia Community College



## RETENTION STRATEGY 5

### Course schedules crafted for students' availability

Many community colleges still roll over their master schedules year after year without evaluating how student preferences have changed. Schedules are often based on faculty preferences and classroom availability, but even during peak times, community colleges' classroom utilization is just 63%.<sup>15</sup> This leaves opportunities on the table. Students have proven they will enroll when classes are offered at favorable times and locations. With projected enrollment declines across the sector, administrators need to respond to students' availability. The results of using this data are increased enrollment and an increased likelihood of persistence since students who make quicker progress toward their credentials tend to persist at better rates than those with less intensive enrollment. This approach is mutually beneficial to both college and student.



**Odessa College** established their Weekend College four years ago.

Along the way, they've learned several valuable lessons. They committed to boosting enrollment by enrolling at least 50% of their students in Weekend College, a format that allows students to graduate within two years by taking classes exclusively on the weekend. To achieve this, they engaged full-time faculty to teach on the weekend. Odessa has been able to act on their commitment to consistency. Course success rates are equally high in traditional Monday-through-Friday classes as compared to weekend courses.

In addition to complete degree programs, administrators sought to bring the entire college experience to students who can attend only on the weekends. Not only will Odessa's weekend-only students find abundant course offerings, but they also have full access to academic advising and financial aid. Even prospective students benefit because they, too, can meet with admissions staff on the weekend, and they have indicated that the ROI on these weekend services is shown in increased enrollments from students who have come to the college to register for courses on a Saturday.

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“ We have to commit to certificate and degree completion as if students are only able to attend on the weekend. That means when we adopt other successful practices, we have to replicate them in Weekend College.”

Valerie Jones,  
Vice-President of Instruction, Odessa College



## RETENTION STRATEGY 6

### Classroom adaptation through the use of technology

Sometimes weekend classes aren't enough. With competing priorities, it can be a challenge for post-traditional students to attend every class session in a given semester. This is likely one reason we see so many of these learners seeking online opportunities, but online classes don't work for all students. Many students like the accountability that comes from seeing the instructor regularly. Others like to build relationships with their peers in class, but when life situations prevent students from attending class, it is easy to fall behind. Putting course materials online can be one approach to keeping students on pace in their classes regardless of obstacles to attending class in person.



**Lakeshore Technical College** took this course adaptation a step further.

In most colleges, courses are offered in a traditional face-to-face format, an entirely online format, or a blended/hybrid format that still requires in-person class attendance and adherence to a set schedule. There are few, if any, options that allow students the option to switch between face-to-face and online learning depending on their needs. Lakeshore Tech, however, has converted face-to-face classes to dual-modality classes.

Each course is taught in the traditional in-person format, but sessions are recorded and uploaded to the class site on the learning management system (LMS). Students who cannot attend a class or two—or even for a few weeks due to unforeseen job shift changes or family needs—do not need to worry about falling behind because they can follow along with all course content and assignments online. Then, when they are able to return to in-person classes, they can pick up right where they left off. This approach provides even greater responsiveness than a traditional hybrid course by allowing students to fluctuate between in-person and online attendance depending on their individual needs at any given time within the term.

Lakeshore Tech has found this model to be successful for their part-time students, in particular. Since launching this and other initiatives, they've seen a 63% decrease in the part-time retention gap.

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There are many ways colleges can adapt campus practices to better serve post-traditional learners. Offering more flexibility to students by promoting student employment, building schedules that are responsive to students' availability, and offering classes and student services in formats and times that work for post-traditional learners are just a few of the ways that colleges can set up post-traditional students for success.

## SECTION 04

# Post-Traditional Learners' Employment Preparation



Today's community colleges understand the importance of preparing students for the workforce. Career preparation workshops, co-ops, and internships abound, but like most student services, college campuses typically offer these opportunities during the day, when many post-traditional students are working, leaving them at a distinct disadvantage when moving into a new career.



### RETENTION STRATEGY 7 Federal Work Study as practical experience

Employers seek graduates with applied experience. However, most post-traditional learners must earn income while they are enrolled, and they certainly can't leave their jobs for unpaid internships, so how can we deliver marketable skills they need to compete in the workforce?

While most post-traditional learners work, their jobs are often in fields unrelated to students' career goals. As mentioned above, post-traditional learners are more likely than traditional students to have an EFC of \$0 and to have unmet financial need, making them ideal candidates for a work-study program on or off campus.

The benefits of work-study are plentiful.<sup>16</sup> First, jobs are most often on campus, reducing the need to incorporate additional commuting time into already-busy schedules. Second, they provide students with an opportunity to engage more deeply with their campus faculty and staff, which can improve their odds of retention. Third, and most importantly, work-study can help students develop skills with clear connections to their major. For example, students pursuing degrees in information technology can work in the computer lab, those pursuing degrees in science can work as a lab assistant, and those interested in business can work in campus offices. Although work-study is typically limited to 20 hours per week, students' employers accommodate their course schedules, and these opportunities allow students to work in jobs that can **affirm their major while deepening campus engagement.**

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“ Without opportunities like work-study, building the first professional resume can be challenging. Building one that would stand up to other candidates' and get your foot in the door is nearly impossible.”

Student Success Counselor at a Mid-Atlantic Community College

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## RETENTION STRATEGY 8

### Apprenticeships in industry

Apprenticeships offer students the opportunity to earn while they learn using a combination of traditional education and hands-on experience with an employer. Typically, as students gain more expertise and credentials, their wages increase progressively.<sup>17</sup>

While apprenticeships can be an excellent resource for providing financial stability, diversity is lacking. Just 6.8% of new apprentices were women and one in three were people of color, Jobs for the Future reports, making partnerships with community colleges an excellent fit.<sup>18</sup>



**Grand Rapids Community College** worked with local industry to help local health care employers fulfill their goal of diversifying their workforce by bringing more people of color into their medical assistant program. While their open-enrollment program had been 98% white, the partnership and commitment to diversity between Grand Rapids Community College, their local employers, and many community-based organizations led to enrollment of their first predominantly nonwhite cohort of medical assistants.<sup>19</sup>



## RETENTION STRATEGY 9

### Partnerships with workforce development boards and community-based organizations

Collaborations between nonprofit agencies are the lifeblood of many community colleges. No individual resource could possibly serve all the needs of their clients, so they must rely on each other to provide the best service to their users. Workforce development boards provide a wealth of labor market data and access to funds for short-term credentials, community partners can stabilize struggling families by securing basic needs, and colleges can deliver the training needed for their students to achieve family-sustaining wages.



**Austin Community College** has partnered with a local nonprofit committed to pulling working adults out of poverty. This partnership offers students wraparound supports from the nonprofit including case management and financial assistance. In exchange, Austin Community College provides on-campus workspace to the nonprofit's career navigators, allowing students to get the support they need to succeed in college as they work toward high-demand occupations.<sup>20</sup>



## RETENTION STRATEGY 10

### Career-preparation workshops in flexible formats

Career-preparation activities are important for all learners. Like traditional-age students, post-traditional students may not know how to explain how their previous employment should be presented on their resumes when entering a new field, or they may need the same guidance that other students need on how to effectively use tools such as LinkedIn. Interviewing, networking, and application skills are also valuable to all students. Yet, post-traditional students don't have the same access to these resources due to the limited time they spend on campus. To accommodate post-traditional learners, colleges can offer the same excellent resources they offer to students during the day in formats that can improve access: in the evening, virtually, or on demand.



Alamo Colleges District has a close partnership with its workforce development board and has collaborated on [myalamocareer.org](http://myalamocareer.org), a virtual resource that provides current job listings and information on current education and training opportunities including "Just in Time" credentials to fast-track students looking for quick employment. Other resources include career assessments, exploration of job demands in the San Antonio area, career workshops, and community resources to provide users with additional support.



## RETENTION STRATEGY 11

### Employer-student networking during nonworking hours

Engaging with potential employers is also a struggle for many adult learners. Most adults can't meet on campus when employers visit during the day. One alternative is to provide opportunities in the evening that engage **6–10 employers from a particular field in roundtables** where employers can share what they seek in employees and students can discuss with employers their skills and learn more about the companies. These events should be planned months in advance to allow working students to take time off work if they have evening jobs. Most employers are receptive to occasional evening events when employers are informed that they will have access to students with the skills they seek and hear the value proposition of their competitors.

Studies have shown that most post-traditional learners need to feel the relevance of what they learn in order to stay engaged and motivated. However, it is often difficult for students to see **how some course content ties into their professional goals**. Without a sense of purpose about what they learn, it is even **easier to disconnect and focus on other priorities that compete for students' attention**.



#### RETENTION STRATEGY 12

##### Professional skills as course content

Faculty recognize the integral role they play in preparing students for employment. However, syllabi are often focused on how things are done instead of why they are done. One of the most effective ways to demonstrate to students how course material relates to their professional goals is to be explicit in syllabi. For example, if students are expected to complete a group project, it is helpful to highlight the purpose of the assignment in language that employers use when listing job skills: group projects develop teamwork, public speaking, and problem-solving skills.



#### RETENTION STRATEGY 13

##### Stackable credentials that are market-recognized and maintain momentum

Community college students often report dissatisfaction in their preenrollment careers, such as having been passed over for promotions or working long hours of hard labor. Yet, few students can stop working when they enroll in college, which limits many post-traditional learners to part-time enrollment. Unfortunately, part-time enrollment is correlated to increased likelihood of stop-out, putting students' investment in their education at risk if they leave college without a credential.

EAB's 2015 report, "Recapturing Adult Learner Enrollment," explained the value of stackable credentials that reflect labor-market needs. Partnering with local employers to align college credentials to specific jobs makes clear to students how additional credentials can lead to advancement. Not only does this demonstrate progress on students' resumes, but it also serves as a motivator, because the next credential is just a few courses away.

“ With each certificate I receive, I'm getting a better position in my job.”

Post-Traditional Learner



# CONCLUSION

Meeting Post-Traditional  
Learners' Where They Are  
**Drives Persistence**



Some experts believe that **higher education has failed post-traditional learners**. Motivated, eager students come to campus, and colleges struggle to get timely information into their hands, causing students to choose poor-fit majors. Students receive little recognition for their rich experiences prior to attending college—which might otherwise be used to provide momentum toward completion of their credentials. In the classroom, students encounter classes that seem to align poorly to their career goals, and they may begin to question why they enrolled in the first place, especially when college practices penalize students when personal and professional obligations take priority over academic goals. When they are on campus in the evening or on the weekend, they see the closed campus resources that are proven to be a valuable part of student success. If they're fortunate enough to be near graduation, many post-traditional learners find they are unable to meet with employers who have expressed an interest in their college's students, and others may struggle with preemployment skills and explaining in their resumes how their coursework prepared them for employment.

**It is no wonder that so many former and prospective students struggle to see the value proposition of community colleges.**

Now is the time to demonstrate to students that their needs are reflected on campus. Deploying the strategies described in this paper paves the path to persistence when life's countless obstacles threaten credential completion. **The key to post-traditional student success is derived through a sense of belonging, feeling that the content they learn is relevant to their professional goals, and receiving support from faculty and staff they perceive as allies.**

Aligning community colleges to the needs of post-traditional students will offer resistance to the tides of enrollment declines that are anticipated in coming years. Post-traditional learners make up the majority of community college enrollment. While many obstacles can derail their efforts, colleges can better support these learners and inspire more successful graduates who progress in their career goals.

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## Endnotes

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