"Can I Make This Work with My Life?"

Exploring the College (Re)Enrollment Decisions of Adult Learners of Color

SEPTEMBER 2023

AIR® Lumina FOUNDATION

Contents

Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

In this report, AIR shares key findings about postsecondary enrollment decision-making experiences of adult learners of color.

More than 82 million learners over the age of 25 have never enrolled in postsecondary education and 40.4 million adult learners have some college credits but no degree. And Black, Latino, and American Indian adults are more likely to fall into these categories than their White counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse, 2023). For institutions, working to fulfill their missions and boost enrollment while effectively serving these adults is a critical goal. But institutions generally are not designed to serve adult learners, and particularly not adult learners of color. Although colleges have evolved in important ways as their student populations have grown and shifted over time, core elements of institutions' structures, practices, and recruiting rest on fundamental assumptions developed when colleges primarily enrolled students coming directly from high school (Jain & Crisp, 2018). Despite interest among institutions in engaging more adult learners, the field has an incomplete understanding of their full experiences, along with what kind of changes by institutions might be valuable to them. A key concept that is under-explored is exploring the decision-making process of adult learners of color who may, or do, consider enrolling in postsecondary education.

This report is one of a series of resources from a study that explored the college-going decision-making experiences of adult learners of color in postsecondary education. Rather than study the specific point in time at which they decided to enroll, we focus on the continual decision-making process that adult learners engage in throughout their educational journey.

We build on the Loss/Momentum Framework (Rassen et al., 2013) to share key findings about adult learners' experiences with education throughout their lives and how those experiences shape their decision making about postsecondary education. We expanded this framework to include shaping experiences (early experiences with education) and ongoing life experiences, acknowledging that the learner's decisionmaking and experiences are shaped outside of their experience with an institution.

Shaping Experiences: Early experiences with education have lasting effects on learners' perceptions of college.

- Cultural backgrounds and parental (or grandparental) influence significantly shape how adult learners are introduced to education and their early attitudes toward pursuing a college degree.

- K–12 school personnel played a vital role in shaping interviewees' perceptions of college and self-perception as "college material" positively or negatively via the expectations they set and the advice, information, and support that they did or did not provide.

Ongoing life experiences: Adult learners' life contexts before and during postsecondary enrollment impact adult learners' many decision points related to enrolling and staying enrolled in college.

- Previous experiences with postsecondary education shape adults' sense of what college is, whether they belong at any college, and what does or does not work for them.

- Adults' ecosystems evolve, but they represent an important influence as a source of information, guidance, and support throughout life.

Pre-(Re)Entry: Most adult learners move through a period where they are not actively enrolled or seeking enrollment but still have experiences that shape their thinking around postsecondary education.

- Motivations: Most adult learners cite a mix of personal and professional motivations coming together as their "why" for enrolling.

- Catalysts: Learners' "why now" catalysts often focused on catalysts external to the institution via encouragement from their ecosystems or job circumstances, though some cited learning new information that made a program option seem feasible for them.

- Connection: During this phase when adult learners have decided to pursue postsecondary education, information that informs their decision is critical.

- Affordability, location, program modality, and flexible options are key decision factors when adult learners consider which institution to apply to.

- Information is key during the connection phase: Learners need access to trusted information to understand enrollment and application processes.

- The timing and quality of information learners receive during the connection phase is important.

(Re)Entry: Once adult learners have made connections, applied, and been accepted, transition support and encouragement is important, especially for adults who may have had previous experiences that negatively shaped their perceptions of postsecondary education.

- Two common challenges during the (re)entry phase involve navigating institutions' complex systems and learners' self-perceptions of academic preparation.

- Orientation and transition programs support adult learners' transitions into postsecondary education, particularly by building networks.

- About half of learners received credit for transfer credits or prior learning assessment; however, more learners expected that they would receive credit when choosing to enroll in their current college but did not.

Progress: This phase, the majority of time adult learners are enrolled, taking courses, and engaging with support services, is impacted by their learners' life contexts and program models that adequately support them is key.

- A consistent interest among adult learners is making college "work" with the rest of their lives; most are interested in flexible or self-driven schedules, but their preferences for program modality vary by their specific circumstances.

- Both interviewees and survey respondents reflected on the unique assets they bring as adult learners that helped them navigate their current path, such as the maturity, self-awareness, and growth that comes from life and work experience.

- Although adult learners generally reported feeling supported "in the classroom" by faculty and peers, they also reported that being one of very few adult learners was a challenge.

- Interviewees described the importance of various types of adult-specific or identity-relevant supports that helped them develop some sense of belonging and supported their progress Immediate labor market value of a degree is a key goal for some, but not all, adult learners; many did not necessarily expect to take on a new job or get promoted immediately following graduation.

Completion/Transition: Transition for adult learners may be less straightforward than for traditionally aged students; for adult learners, they are not moving to a first job, and may have been employed all along, meaning they may be looking to career services for different support.

- Immediate labor market value of a degree is a key goal for some, but not all, adult learners; many did not necessarily expect to take on a new job or get promoted immediately following graduation.

Overall, our findings suggest that understanding the decision-making process of adult learners of color is crucial for institutions to create and implement effective recruitment and support strategies. In addition, it's important to understand other factors shaping their decisions and perceptions, which may influence outreach channels and opportunities. In addition to exploring these findings, this report concludes by reflecting on potential implications for institutions that are interested in improving their approaches.

Introduction

Background: The Importance of Understanding College-going Decisions among Adult Learners of Color

Many institutions in the United States continue to express interest in recruiting and enrolling adult learners like Jennifer, the Black woman whose story we highlight [in the panel on this page] (Donaldson, 2022). This makes sense, given that fewer high school graduates are enrolling directly in postsecondary education, leading to enrollment declines for many institutions. In addition, institutions and states have committed to improving degree attainment and social mobility. Together, these trends have elevated enrollment among adult learners as an important priority for institutions. And there are many adults to serve: More than 82 million learners over the age of 25 have never enrolled in postsecondary education, and 40.4 million adult learners have some college credits but no degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse, 2023). In particular, Black, Hispanic or Latino, and American Indian adults are more likely to fall into these categories than their White counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). For institutions working to fulfill their missions and boost enrollment, effectively serving these adults is a critical goal.

But institutions generally are not designed to serve adult learners, and particularly not adult learners of color.[1] Although colleges have evolved in important ways as their student populations have grown and shifted over time, core elements of institutions' structures, practices, and recruiting rest on fundamental assumptions developed when colleges primarily enrolled students coming directly from high school (Jain & Crisp, 2018; Pappano & Hechinger, 2021). More specifically, fundamental designs were set when postsecondary institutions primarily served upper-class White men, when women and people of color were excluded from most institutions by both law and practice (Garcia, 2019; Harris, 2021). As such, inviting, recruiting, and serving adult learners—and especially adult learners of color— requires new approaches by institutions that involve meaningful changes to the full experience for learners.

Jennifer, a 57-year old Black woman, excelled as an operations manager. She was long interested in completing a degree; she previously enrolled in three colleges at different points in her life, including a 4-year institution and two 2-year institutions. But she had to stop out when school conflicted too much with her caregiving responsibilities or when she could not prioritize paying for tuition.

"Let's try this again later" became a common refrain—maybe when she had more time, or perhaps fewer demands on her finances. But her career progression hit a roadblock: despite her years of experience, dedication, and expertise, she was essentially demoted because she did not have a degree in her field when her employer reclassified her job as requiring a postsecondary degree. Jennifer resolved to reenroll and complete a degree, telling herself, "This can't keep happening."

Eventually, an extended family member told her about a college that offered flexible courses online that might be feasible with her work and family commitments. Although she was initially skeptical that an online option would be engaging enough, she figured it might be the best way to make it work for her. With that flexibility and her personal determination, Jennifer has embraced the challenge of late nights and sacrificing Saturdays as she pursues her degree, again.

---

[1] We define adult learners as adults between the ages of 25 and 64 who currently do not have a postsecondary education credential but are either currently enrolled or considering (re)enrolling. We consider adult learners of color to include adult learners that identify as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or Indigenous, Asian or Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Please see the Methods section for details about the sample involved in this research.

Despite extensive interest among institutions in engaging more adult learners, the field has an incomplete understanding of their full experiences, along with what kind of changes by institutions might be valuable to them. A key concept that is under-explored—and serves as a useful starting point—is exploring the decision-making process of adult learners of color who may, or do, consider enrolling in postsecondary education. Understanding the decisions, including when, why, and how they happen, might help the field better recruit and serve adult learners of color.

This Series

This report is one of a series of resources from a study that explored the college-going decision-making experiences of adult learners of color in postsecondary education. Rather than study the specific point in time at which they decided to enroll, we focus on the continual decision-making process that adult learners engage in throughout their educational journey. The study team believed this lens would be valuable in that it would allow us to uncover important dynamics, experiences, people, or information that shape and affect the decisions and trajectories of adult learners of color. For additional insights, perspectives, findings, and contact information if you have questions for the authors, please visit our website: www.air.org/postsec-adultlearners

This Report

In this report, AIR shares key findings about postsecondary enrollment decision-making experiences of adult learners of color. This report serves as our main study report, encompassing the range of topics we explored; an important goal of this project was to shed light on new issues or ideas, including those that might spark experimentation with interventions or systems changes by practitioners.

In order to support practitioners and policymakers in better understanding this issue, we address the following key research questions:

1. How and when do adult learners of color make decisions about (re)enrolling in postsecondary education? What factors contribute to those decisions?

2. What information about colleges' offerings—specifically their program models[2]—resonate with adult learners of color and influence their decisions to (re)enroll in postsecondary education while supporting their educational goals?

---

[2] For more information on our operational definition of program models, please see the Literature Review section.

Relevant Literature

A relatively extensive research base exists about adult learners. In particular, existing research explores their *motivations* for enrolling in postsecondary education, as well as the *barriers and constraints* they face, especially how they differ from students enrolling directly after high school. Existing studies also investigate andragogy and in-class strategies to support adult learners. For example, several studies point to adult learners having varied motivations for enrollment that include both intrinsic (personal goals and aspirations) and extrinsic (financial improvement, career preparation, career advancement) factors (Gardner et al., 2022; Ross-Gordon, 2005). Some of these studies have pointed to the barriers to enrollment including lack of information about the benefits of earning a degree, lack of information about how to enroll, insufficient financial

resources, and time and flexibility constraints of available programs (Hunte et al. 2020; Patterson, 2018). Studies also have called attention to the unique strengths adult learners possess, such as their skills, high engagement in classrooms, and self-perceptions around being goal-oriented, mature, self-reliant, and persistent as a result of their lived experiences (Kasworm, 2005, 2010).

However, less research has focused on college decision making among adult learners, including strategies or issues particularly important for adult learners of color, and the program models that matter most for adult learners (outside specific evaluations of unique models). Little work has been done on these topics, despite their important considerations for practice. Our study begins to address these critical gaps. In this section, we briefly describe relevant literature on each topic.

College Decision Making

There is a dearth of research focused on understanding the actual postsecondary decision making of adult learners. Extensive literature exists focused on college choice processes and models for students making college choices when they transition directly from high school, including the inequities that emerge in that process (see, as select examples, Chapman, 1981; Gallagher & Hossler, 1987; Niu & Tienda, 2008; Perna, 2006). These models emphasize choice *between* postsecondary options, focused on choice as a specific event and emphasizing a relatively linear process focused on *where* students choose and *why*.

As Iloh (2019) points out, these choice models are limited, because many learners do not have "choices"—they are limited by factors such as location and opportunity cost. She also notes that these models assume choice as a specific point in time—"a discrete event"—focused on the moment students leave high school. Her work expands a conceptual model of *college-going decision making* (including dimensions such as time, opportunity, and information), which acknowledges decisions or factors long before a moment of "choice." Although Iloh's work acknowledges application for adult learners, initial applications of this conceptual model focus primarily on exploring decision making among marginalized high school students, particularly Black and Hispanic/Latino students (see, for example, Emmanuel, 2023; Nava et al., 2023).

Adult Learners of Color

Of the relevant studies focused on motivations, barriers, or supports, most commonly cited pieces have focused *primarily* on White adults. The pieces that have focused on Black or Hispanic/Latino adult learners indicate, though, that there are important differences for adult learners of color: they find that adult learners of color disproportionately cite the importance of upward mobility, self-development, and serving as positive role models for family and community members (Cooker, 2003; Garza, 2011; Nuriddin-Little, 2020; Perez et al., 2018). Other studies focus primarily on supports for adult learners of color once they have made the decision and enrolled, including the importance of culturally relevant teaching and curriculum supports, as well as interests in earning credit via prior learning assessment (Jain & Crisp, 2018; Klein-Collins, 2020).

Program Models

As evident in the research questions, this study had a particular interest in implications for institutions related to understanding how and whether "program models" were a factor in the decision making of adult learners of color. By "program models," we mean the structure, design, and practices of institutions that become the learner's core experience and (a) allow adult learners to meet their goals for entering a program, (b) reduce or eliminate the "role conflict" present when being a student is incompatible (in terms of time, energy, or other constraints) with life outside of being a student, and (c) provide "adult-relevant" support (Home, 1998; Jain & Crisp, 2018). For example, a commonly-recommended program model approach for adult learners involves short-term, flexible programs connected to specific work outcomes, and may even be tailored to adult learners (Kasworm, 2010; Choitz & Prince, 2008). These approaches commonly appear in recommendations focused on adult learners (for example, Bennett & Steinberg, 2022). Another example would be emerging competency-based education programs of any length, which focus on a design centered on flexibility and demonstration of competency, combined with personalized supports (Mason et al., 2021). Although many of these emerging programs describe a capacity to attract and serve populations that have not been well-served by traditional models—including adult learners of color—it is not clear whether program models are salient in the decision-making processes of adult learners of color.

Building on this literature, this study aims to shed light on the decision-making processes of adult learners, particularly adult learners of color, to deepen the field's understanding of its potential learners in ways that inspire changes that invite and welcome them. In addition, we explore adult learners' concerns, interests, and experiences with elements of program models (the structure, design, and practices of institutions that students experience), including *whether and how* these factored into their decisions.

Data and Methods

This study takes a mixed methods approach generally following an Exploratory Sequential Design approach (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The exploratory nature of deep qualitative interviews allows for deep qualitative exploration of decision making; the survey complements that by exploring the prevalence and relationships between the factors uncovered during interviews.

Narrative Interviews

This study sought to uncover and expand the field's understanding of adult learners' decision making, which required a deeper, exploration-oriented research approach. Therefore, we used a life history narrative interview approach to leverage "the opportunity to collect rich data textured by the respondents' own interpretations of their experiences and the social circumstances in which their story has unfolded" (Sosluski et al., 2010). This method allows participants to maintain more agency over their narratives than a semistructured approach and to expand the concepts of decision making and influencing factors based on the participant's own understanding. The interviews involved three sessions, up to 90 minutes each, and occurred in winter 2021–22, so it is important to keep in mind that ongoing COVID-19 closures and implications may have shaped our sample and their responses. The approach to the interviews was informed by principles for building trust, rapport, and respect with interviewees from marginalized communities from Chicago Beyond (2019).

The study team recruited learners aged 25–64 who were either currently enrolled in postsecondary education or enrolled within the last 10 years. To acknowledge the substantial time commitment required to participate, we offered $150 total in gift card codes to interviewees who completed all three interviews. The final analytic sample drew from extensive interviews with 16 interviewees, to whom we are grateful for sharing their stories.

Our interview sample focused specifically on adult learners of color, so insights drawn from these interviews emphasize their experiences. The 16 interviewees (Table 1) comprised nine women and seven men, ranging in age from 31 to 57; seven were in their 30s at the time of the interviews. Seven worked full time, and others either did not report working or reported working in part-time jobs. Fourteen reported being enrolled in college before their current enrollment (current at the time of the interview), followed by some kind of pause, stop-out, or delayed transfer between that and their current enrollment. Nine initially had enrolled directly following high school, whereas the remaining seven did not enroll at that point. Twelve were enrolled at a 4-year institution, and four were enrolled at 2-year institutions. Almost all interviewees had experience at a 2-year institution; only one interviewee reported *never* having enrolled at a 2-year institution at some point in their journey. Nine were parents, and three had experienced incarceration. Six reported enrolling in online-only programs, whereas others were a mix of online or in person/face to face or exclusively in person/face to face. Five previously completed a GED program, whereas the rest graduated from high school.

TABLE 1. INTERVIEWEE PSEUDONYMS AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

PSEUDONYM	AGE	RACE/ETHNICITY	GENDER
Betty	39	Hispanic	Female
Charles	39	Black	Male
Charlie	33	Hispanic	Male
Eric	33	Asian	Male
Jennifer	57	Black	Female
Julia	31	Hispanic	Female
Kai	45	Pacific Islander	Male
Linda	55	Black	Male
Marvin	46	Black	Male
Mary	41	Hispanic	Female
Max	42	Black	Male
Mia	49	American Indian, Hispanic, Asian-Indian	Female
Nancy	43	Hispanic	Female
Susan	54	American Indian, White	Female
William	32	Hispanic	Male

Survey

To complement the narrative interviews and qualitative data analysis, we also conducted a survey of adult learners. The goal of the survey was to capture a wider range of perspectives and to triangulate the data collected through the narrative interviews. We developed the survey protocol based on key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the narrative interviews so that we could develop a better understanding of how widespread these themes were.

Table 2 presents the key characteristics of the 358 adult learners in our survey sample, including race/ethnicity, age, caregiving responsibilities, veteran status, and parents' education. The table also compares our survey sample with the national adult learner population for context.[3] We intended to oversample adult learners of color, aligned with the study goals, and to allow for disaggregation by groups. Generally, we oversampled Hispanic or Latino adult learners when compared to the national population (39% and 19%, respectively), but we under-sampled White adult learners (as planned; 34% and 47%), and slightly under-sampled Black learners (15% and 17%). Our sample is directionally similar but not a perfectly representative sample in terms of most other characteristics: age, whether they are a parent, caregiver, or veteran, and their parents' highest level of education. That said, the national figures represent 2019-2020 enrollees, and our survey was administered in fall-winter 2022-2023. Significant changes in overall enrollment by age and race/ethnicity have been documented since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,[4] so we encourage *directional* interpretation in this exploratory study only.

TABLE 2. SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS COMPARED TO NATIONAL POPULATION OF ADULT LEARNERS

CHARACTERISTIC	CATEGORY	SURVEY SAMPLE	NATIONAL ADULT LEARNER POPULATION
Race/ethnicity	Black or African American	15%	17%
	Hispanic or Latino	39%	19%
	White	34%	47%
	Asian	6%	6%
	All other categories	6%	10%
Age	25-35	53%	65%
	36-45	27%	22%
	46+	20%	13%
Caregiving	Child at home (under 18)	40%	56%
	Provide unpaid care for family member, relative, friend	14%	9%
Veteran status	Veteran or active-duty military	8%	12%
Parents' education	No postsecondary credential	66%	72%
	Associate's degree	14%	7%
	Bachelor's degree or higher	20%	21%

Notes: *national figures for age represents percentage of all adult learners who fall in that age range. National figure for "provide unpaid care for family member, relative, or friend" defined as "has dependent(s) other than children," which is an imperfect match.*

[3] Authors' calculations based on the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020 Undergraduates (NPSAS:UG). Accessed via the National Center for Education Statistics Data Lab: https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/.

[4] For more on changes in enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic, see the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's *Stay Informed* series: https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/.

We conducted descriptive analyses of survey data to identify trends and to explore the extent to which survey findings were aligned with findings from the narrative interviews. We disaggregated all analyses by race/ethnicity, with an eye toward any differences between White learners and adult learners of color. Throughout the report, we point to any such differences when they are statistically significant. Finally, the survey primarily focused on adult learners' experiences with college-going decision making and experiences in college, including factors that influenced their decisions, their experience considering and applying to college(s), and their experiences as an adult learner once enrolled (for example, with support services, scheduling, courses, and other elements). The survey did not include in-depth questions about learners' prior history with education (e.g., high school or previous college enrollment). Thus, not all sections in this report present survey findings associated with that topic.

Positionality

The research team that conducted interviews and analyzed the data included one Asian-American woman, one Black man, three Black women, one White Hispanic man, one Latina woman, one White man, and three White women. All have postsecondary education backgrounds in the behavioral and social sciences, and varying levels of behavioral and social science research training and experience. Four research team members have experience working at postsecondary institutions. Collectively, the researchers have first or secondhand experience with themes pertaining to adult learner experiences participating in education (e.g., experience as an adult learner, a person of color, a first-generation student). The research team reflected on how their interpretation of interviewees' responses likely is informed by team members' own lived experiences, including disciplinary training and postsecondary experiences. Generally, the analysis approach, particularly for the narrative interviews, sought to allow themes to emerge through analysis, calibration, and collaborative discussion, to mitigate the biases of any one member. For the survey findings, the team met to review, classify, and discuss findings and framing, again aiming to minimize the bias of any specific individual.

Findings

AIR developed the framing demonstrated in Exhibit 1 to situate our findings in ways that align to an adult learner's experience. We found many other learner experience frameworks insufficient for this particular study because they often are inspired by a traditional student's experience. Typically, they also focus on the student's experience inside the institution, both in terms of where the framework begins and ends, as well as the degree to which they acknowledge any other roles the student might play. This approach is appropriate when institutions use student experience frameworks for internal discussions to understand students' experiences *at their institution*, but to represent adult learners' experiences fully, we sought to frame their experience, including starting long before their enrollment.

This framing uses a learner's perspective, emphasizing the rest of their lives, with engagement with an institution representing just one (smaller) part of their lives. It also represents an extended period where they may have occasionally considered college opportunities but were not actively deciding to enroll or get in contact with a specific institution—the "pre-(re)entry" phase.

Then, to represent their experiences engaging with a specific institution, this framing borrows from the Loss/Momentum Framework's phases: Connection, (Re)Entry, Progress, and Completion/Transition (Rassen et al., 2013).

Finally, arrows signal the situations where adult learners consider, enroll, pause, restart, or transfer. Many learners started, stopped, swirled, reenrolled, and paused again far more times than could be represented in such an image, but these arrows indicate the importance of nonlinear patterns.

We use this framing to ground and organize our findings, discussing both findings from our interviews and the survey responses. The first sections, Shaping Experiences and Ongoing Life Experience, document the way the rest of adults' lives before and during periods of enrollment shape their decisions. Then, we turn to a section on the pre-(re)entry phase and each step of the Loss/Momentum Framework.

EXHIBIT 1. ADULT LEARNER JOURNEY FRAMING

Broader Life Journey

SHAPING EXPERIENCES   PRE-(RE)ENTRY   ONGOING LIFE EXPERIENCE

Connection   (Re)Entry   Progress   Completion/Transition

Enrollment at a Specific Institution
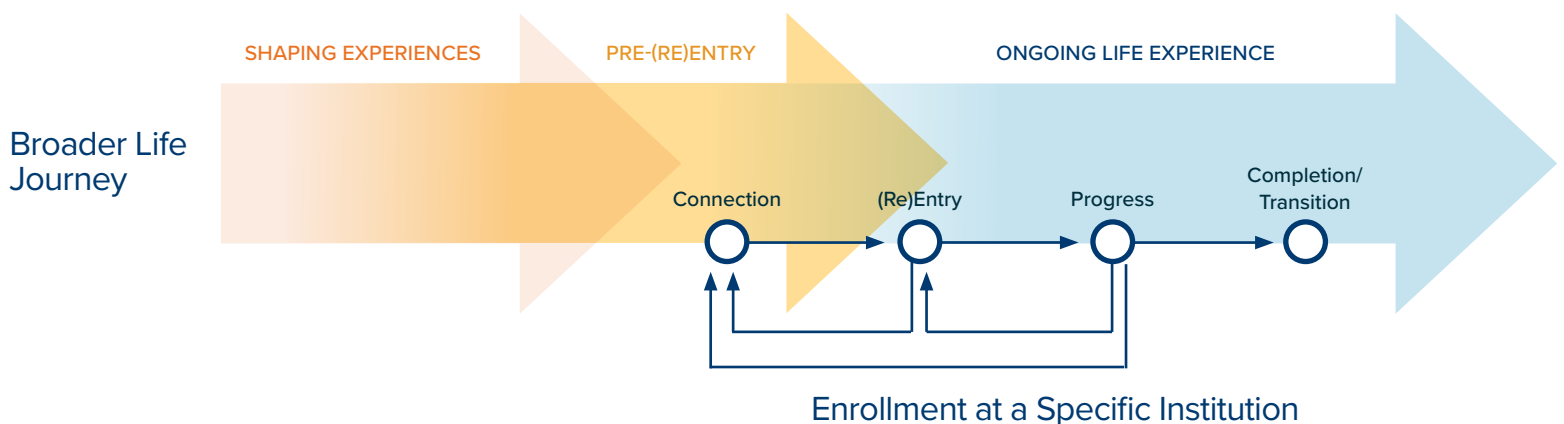
Life Context
Shaping Experiences and Ongoing Life Experiences

The learner journey framing intentionally presents "life context" as a larger shape to emphasize the well-demonstrated idea that adult learners have a life and roles far beyond their identity as a student and the time they spend in classes. We distinguish early shaping experiences from ongoing life context, which allows us to explore how *both* current commitments outside of enrollment *and* prior earlier experiences influenced perceptions and decisions. We consider early shaping experiences to include experiences, advice, or perceptions they gained early in life that shaped their overall understanding (or lack thereof) about college while still a child. In terms of ongoing life context, we consider that to include well-established formal "role conflicts" that shape whether and how they have time and energy to engage in postsecondary education—including responsibilities such as work and caregiving—as well as informal messages that shape perceptions of college as feasible for them (Home, 1998). This life context is important because participants described how these experiences informed their subsequent decisions, including what information they wanted or their perceptions about who college is 'for.'

Shaping Experiences

Many adults grew up at a time when not all students were encouraged to consider attending college. We found that many of our interviewees recalled initial impressions of college and whether they were "college material" as a shaping factor in how their actual educational trajectories and decisions have unfolded. Even when someone is motivated to pursue a college degree as an adult, certain negative perceptions from early in life can might work against institutions' attempts to invite them (back) to enroll now without attention to addressing those perceptions and concerns.

Cultural backgrounds and parental (or grandparental) influence significantly shape how adult learners are introduced to education and their early attitudes toward pursuing a college degree.

Family ties often serve as learners' initial interactions and introductions to education. Among interviewees, a third emphasized the significance of their families of origin. These references became particularly salient when interviewees discussed the roles they held within their families and how it affected their educational choices. Specifically, several interviewees who primarily identified as Hispanic/Latino and/or immigrants shared their experiences of receiving messaging from their families that prioritized work over school or portrayed college as unattainable because of their racial or ethnic background. One interviewee expressed this sentiment by saying the impression their family shared was limiting, a message the interviewee characterized as, *"Mexicans don't pursue college or even think about going to college, you know? Our heritage is work, you know, to provide… All that fancy college stuff is for the White kids."*

Family members were also cited as sources of encouragement to consider college. Those family members were not limited to parents or siblings, either; multiple interviewees cited the influence of a grandmother, for instance. In one example, Marvin shared, *"Mom was kind of the first introduction to college, and then Grandma also kind of was encouraging* […]. *Definitely was a reinforcement."* Mia offered a similar story, describing her grandmother as an important and gentle influence: *"She is very important to me. She did stress getting an education, but she did not do it, eh, in a way that was pressuring."*

Interviewees generally considered these family members as early influencers. Their families often helped them understand whether or not college was an expectation and gave them a lens through which they filtered other information and encouragement (or discouragement) in subsequent years.

K–12 school personnel played a vital role in shaping interviewees' perception of college and self-perception as "college material" positively or negatively via the expectations they set and the advice, information, and support that they did or did not provide.

Interviewees described receiving signals from people such as teachers, principals, counselors, administrators, and school staff that shaped their self-perceptions or perceptions of college. For example, although interviewees generally avoided describing potential motivations, a few described racism as contributing to why administrators or teachers expressed low expectations of them. As one interviewee described, *"I grew up in a very, uh, different environment that was not accustomed to my skin tone. So I did not grow up in, in, in a school place where they talked about college for me. They didn't even know what I was."*

Interviewees "felt" those low expectations by what information school personnel shared with them about post–high school options and whether they expressed encouragement. Although many of those interviewees now understand that those low expectations were

not their own fault, they described those messages as creating an atmosphere of limited possibilities and opportunities for themselves, discouraging them from attending college following graduation. As Julia shared, *"I feel like a lot of times they, they focus more on a group that has like the good grades, like those kids, the 4.0s or the, the ones that are like, I feel like they know what they want and they know they're applying here and they're applying there. But looking back I don't think like I never had like someone there to be like, 'Hey, FAFSA's coming up. You should apply now.'"* Julia described that knowing what she knows now, she could have started at a community college, but she did not understand that option at the time, as no guidance counselor spent time explaining options and encouraging her.

That said, some of the interviewees did initially enroll in college following high school graduation; in contrast, those interviewees described positive messages from school personnel—guidance counselors, teachers, or others—as providing encouragement and key information to support their self-perception as "college material" and their belief that attending college was feasible for them.

**KEY FINDINGS:
SHAPING EXPERIENCES**

- Cultural backgrounds and parental (or grandparental) influence significantly shape how adult learners are introduced to education and their early attitudes toward pursuing a college degree.

- K–12 school personnel played a vital role in shaping interviewees' perceptions of college and self-perception as "college material" positively or negatively via the expectations they set and the advice, information, and support that they did or did not provide.

Ongoing Life Experiences

Adult learners have lives that are full of people and responsibilities that can both encourage or discourage— enable or prevent—their pursuit of a degree. Ongoing life experiences refer to the ongoing context of adults before or during their enrollment in a postsecondary institution. These factors can include family, work, community, and more. Critically, each of these factors is not necessarily a constraint or competing for the adult learner's attention; though the discourse often describes family as a "role conflict" for adult learners, they can also be sources of inspiration and commitment. And, these factors can be consistent or a source of "shock" in an adult's life; for example, work can be a long-term conflicting commitment, but it could also be a situation where *losing* a job means someone has time available, and may be an opportunity to enroll in classes during the day. These people and responsibilities become part of the learners' ongoing life context that shape and inform their ongoing decisions about (re)enrolling, both initially and each term thereafter.

Previous experiences with postsecondary education shape adults' sense of what college is, whether they belong at any college, and what does or does not work for them.

Most, but not all, interviewees had at least one prior period of enrollment at a college before their current enrollment; some initially enrolled directly out of high school, whereas others enrolled for a few terms at one or two community colleges for short periods before their current enrollment. Interviewees referred to ways that these experiences shaped both their understanding or assumptions about what college was and their perceptions about whether college was "for" or "worked for" them. Some described negative experiences that shaped either their perception of college or perception of themselves as college material, including failing grades, experiences of feeling like their college campus was not a "fit," or realizing that they could not make enrolling and working happen at the same time. These experiences sometimes shaped their preferences or apprehension as they considered whether or when to return to postsecondary education in the future.

Adults' ecosystems evolve, but they represent an important moderator of their decisions throughout life, including as a source of information, guidance, and encouragement or discouragement.

Just as interviewees described the importance of the influence of immediate family and K–12 school personnel on their perceptions in early life, the adults' ongoing ecosystem—or the close individuals who might be *affected* by someone's decision to return to college or *who affect their decision* via guidance or support—played an important role in shaping their decisions. We use the term "ecosystem" to refer to that "inner circle." Interviewees described partners, children, parents, or other people for whom they serve as caregiver as key people who would be *affected by* their decision to return (typically in terms of schedules, finances, or household work). Interviewees also described being influenced by those who support or guide their decision to enroll, including two groups we refer to as information brokers (sharing trustworthy information and guiding them to the right resources, forms, or advice about enrollment) and mentors (those who provide encouragement and guidance about enrolling). The individuals fulfilling these roles sometimes overlapped for our interviewees, but generally, they described each type of support. We describe the specific roles of information brokers in the following "pre-(re)entry" section.

EXHIBIT 2. LEARNER'S ECOSYSTEMS

(Those **affected by** the learner's decision) **+** (Those **influencing** the learner's decision) **=** (**The learner's ecosystem**)

That said, ecosystems evolve over time, including in terms of how they might influence decisions. Even our interviewees, who were all (re)enrolled, provided examples of periods when this ecosystem also contributed to their decisions to stop out or to avoid enrolling. For example, Jennifer described that, although her partner and son supported her enrollment and even provided specific information and encouragement about her current program, there were times earlier in life when considering the impact on them led her to avoid enrolling in courses. Further, an important distinction might exist between White adult learners and learners of color, with initial research suggesting that the advice ecosystems of adult learners of color are relatively smaller and more likely to include solely family as compared to the ecosystems of White adult learners (Jones, forthcoming). It is not yet clear how these differences may affect learners' decisions, but this highlights that ecosystems may be an important area of further study to fully understand.

Past educational experiences, shifts in various aspects of the learner's life, and developments within the learner's ecosystem are all factors that are constantly shaping adults' considerations related to pursuing a degree. Understanding the preexisting influences and their influence on decision making can inform when and how to share information or support with prospective adult learners.

KEY FINDINGS: ONGOING LIFE EXPERIENCES

- Previous experiences with postsecondary education shape adults' sense of what college is, whether they belong at any college, and what does or does not work for them.

- Adults' ecosystems evolve, but they represent an important influence as a source of information, guidance, and support throughout life.

The College Experience(s)

This section focuses on findings focused on considering and attending college. In this section, we focus primarily on aspects associated with the Loss/Momentum Framework to describe key findings aligned to each phase. In each section, we describe the initial intent of the Loss/Momentum Framework stage, whether and how adjustments are relevant for adult learners from this perspective, and our findings related to that topic. Our findings propose updates to this framework and add more context relevant to adult learners.

Pre-(re)entry

As we sought to understand the decision-making processes of our interviewees, an extended phase that we have termed the "pre-(re)entry" phase emerged. This phase is not part of the existing Loss/Momentum Framework, but it is important for framing the college decision-making period through the lens of an adult learner who does not have an existing decision point or college transition support infrastructure like a high school senior might. As we asked adult learners about their life experiences and motivations for enrolling in college, it became evident that, while we often frame college-related decisions as happening right before enrollment, many participants had spent years generally aware of college and having some motivation to (re-)enroll. They described, however, a variety of reasons that they did not take specific steps toward searching out college options until some other kind of catalyst prompted them to decide it was "time."

EXHIBIT 3. NON-LINEAR DECISIONMAKING EXPERIENCES OF ADULT LEARNERS

First consider enrolling in college

Continue considering, with both motivators and constraints in mind

Research/understand options

Request information

Submit applications and required documents

Select college

Enrollment

What institutions "see:"

Request information

Submit applications and required documents

Enrollment
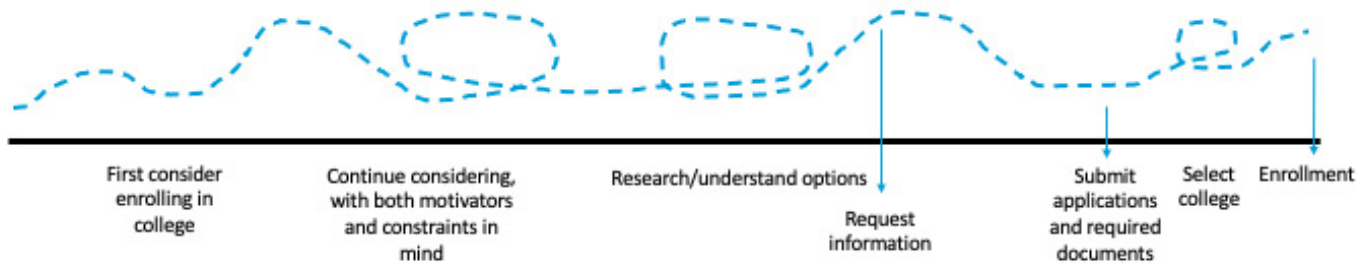
We came to understand this period as a potential decision-making period—a time when life events are nudging adults to think about postsecondary education (or perceive it as infeasible), during which a change in circumstance, new information, or encouragement might be particularly impactful to their decision about whether (and when) to (re)enroll. Critically, institutions do not "see" the learners during this time, until or unless they reach out to a specific institution or engage with a nonprofit organization or state-based adult learner enrollment effort (see Exhibit 3). For the vast majority of adult learners, our interviews make clear that no such infrastructure or formal 'information brokers' exist;

information available to them is incomplete or limited—for instance, not responding to the specific questions or concerns they had about college, including how it could fit within their other life responsibilities. We contrast this with the infrastructure of supports, resources, and information available to high school students, who are approaching a specific decision point about college.

In this section, we explore some of the factors that interviewees described as key motivations, as well as the *catalysts* that prompted them to decide it was time to enroll.

Motivations: Most cite a mix of personal and professional motivations as their "why" for enrolling.

During this period, our interviewees described either beginning or continuing to sense their motivations for enrolling. Consistent with prior research on this topic, we found that adult learners had a range of motivations for enrolling in college and earning a degree and, often, learners described multiple kinds of motivations. For many, a confluence of professional and personal, or extrinsic and intrinsic, motivations came together as their "why." In almost all cases, adult learners shared a general sense that a college degree would lead to a life or career change—something that would improve their lives in a substantial way. These commonly included financial stability and having better career options and creating a better life for themselves or their children.

This finding in our qualitative work is consistent with what we learned from our survey participants: as shown in Table 2, respondents selected both personal and professional motivations among their top three motivating factors for (re)enrolling. Overall, the most commonly selected motivating factors included to accomplish a personal goal (57%); to become more financially stable (42%); and to begin a new career (42%). When looking at trends across race/ethnicity groups, we found that the motivation to "accomplish a personal goal" is relatively consistent across each group; however, Hispanic/Latino and Black learners were particularly likely to select "to become more financially stable" as a top-three motivator compared to White adult learners, and Hispanic/Latino learners were less likely to select "to begin a new career" than others.

TABLE 3. MOTIVATIONS RATED AS TOP-THREE FACTORS BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS

MOTIVATIONS	OVERALL	HISPANIC/ LATINO	AFRICAN AMERICAN OR BLACK	WHITE	ALL OTHER RACE/ ETHNICITY GROUPS
To accomplish a personal goal	57%	58%	60%	63%	31%
To finish a degree that I started previously	29%	27%	34%	33%	28%
To develop new knowledge/skills	27%	23%	20%	32%	28%
To begin a new career	43%	36%	48%	46%	36%
To have a college experience	8%	8%	10%	6%	8%
To become more financially stable	43%	51%	54%	28%	46%
To change my life circumstances	33%	37%	16%	26%	56%
To be a role model for my family or community	26%	33%	20%	24%	23%
To qualify for a new job(s) that required a degree or credential	27%	24%	18%	35%	33%
To meet a degree requirement at my current job	3%	1%	10%	2%	3%
TOTAL	358	127	50	110	71

Catalysts: Learners' "why now" catalysts often focused on catalysts external to the institution via encouragement from their ecosystems or job circumstances, though some cited learning new information that made a program option seem feasible for them.

Distinct from motivations, we explored the learners' "catalysts"—or factors that shifted the learners' general motivation from a "why" to "why now"—a key feature distinguishing adult learners' decision-making from traditionally aged students. Catalysts could be a new imperative (for instance, when required to earn a degree for a promotion or to stay in a specific job), or it could be new support (for instance, family or friends encouraging enrollment), or a change in circumstance or opportunity that makes enrolling feasible now (for instance, the availability of online courses during the pandemic). Most learners cited catalysts that are external to the institution—that is, from their ecosystems—but some cited a combination of external and institutional catalysts. Our interviews occurred in 2021, so COVID-19–related factors—available time, reflection, job losses, or even knowing that institutions were offering online courses—played a role in several interviewees' descriptions of catalysts.

The most frequently referenced catalyst in interviews could be considered external to institutions: encouragement or information from their ecosystems (defined in the Ongoing Life Context section). As described in the earlier section about ecosystems, support varied from encouragement (a mentor role) to information-sharing (the information broker role), or some combination of the two. Julia described experiences with encouragement and information from a friend in her ecosystem:

> *And with my friend, um, I don't know. I guess like when she told me like, "No let's apply, like once." I was like, "Okay, let me just try it." Like, I don't think there was something maybe just knowing or seeing that she was doing good. Like she had passed, she had like straight A's in the past semester. So I'm like, like, "Oh, you know, maybe I could still do it. Maybe I still have it in my head." Like seeing her, I don't think there was a moment just in general seeing that she was succeeding. I was like, "Oh, I could do it too."*

That same friend guided her to the college, to each form, and even helped her contact her high school to request her transcripts. This experience was echoed by other interviewees, who described similar people in their lives (including friends or coworkers) providing direct encouragement or support; in some cases, interviewees described these people as particularly important when they, too, were enrolled or recently completed as an adult learner.

Other external catalysts included changes in circumstance or opportunity, particularly state scholarships or other financial support. No interviewee cited financial support as their reason to attend college, but it could serve as a catalyst when making college seem more feasible, financially. Finally, a quarter of the interviewees cited catalysts that their chosen institution had control over; in many cases, that included information they received about the availability of program and course schedules that fit their lives (part-time, flexible, and a shorter-term credential). As Jennifer described, it took learning about a flexible program that could fit her schedule to encourage her to reenroll, saying *"Full-time job, take care of my family... and that's what I've done for all those years until last year when I said, 'I'm gonna try this again.' And [family member] actually brought it up, sent an email in reference to this program for [institution] where it was online classes [...] you know, how it was at your own pace."* With that information in mind, and additional encouragement from her son, who was also enrolled in an online course at the time, she decided this was *"the program for me with the time that I have."*

These findings shed light on the importance of considering the length of time, the often-ongoing openness to education, and the combination of both *motivations* and *catalysts* as key components to consider when understanding the decisions of adult learners.

KEY FINDINGS: PRE-(RE)ENTRY

- **Motivations:** Most adult learners cite a mix of personal and professional motivations coming together as their "why" for enrolling.

- **Catalysts:** Learners' "why now" catalysts often focused on catalysts external to the institution via encouragement from their ecosystems or job circumstances, though some cited learning new information that made a program option seem feasible for them.

Connection

The next phase in adult learners' journeys is the connection phase. The Loss/Momentum Framework identifies the connection phase as the period when learners have *decided* to pursue postsecondary education until they complete an application. During this time, learners are gathering information about institutions and making key decisions that inform where they ultimately decide to apply. In some ways, this phase would be the most similar to the point when students transitioning from high school are sorting through their college *choices*. The Loss/Momentum Framework highlights the importance of information, counseling, and coaching during this phase, but focuses primarily on how to provide these to traditionally aged students finishing high school and preparing to enter postsecondary education directly. For adult learners, as described in the previous section, the period between high school and ultimate enrollment in postsecondary education may be much longer and may even include previous enrollments in postsecondary institutions.

Our findings provide insights into what the connection phase looks like for adult learners, both in terms of what kind of program and institutional features are key decision factors and how information affects the connection phase when learners are not engaged in formal education systems where institutions can easily connect with them.

Affordability, location, program modality, and flexible options are key decision factors.

Interviewees reported considering multiple factors in their decisions to apply and ultimately select which college to attend. Most respondents applied to only one or two colleges, and learned about these colleges from friends and family, the college being local, or the college's reputation. Decision factors include both personal considerations and institutional characteristics.

Finances and affordability remain the most important point, according to survey responses (exhibit 4). Ninety percent reported that cost of attendance was a somewhat important or very important factor in their decision, and 81% said that access to financial support through the college, scholarships, or other sources was somewhat or very important. Interviewees' reflections were consistent with these findings.

EXHIBIT 4. COLLEGE ENROLLMENT FACTORS

How important were the following factors in your decision to enroll in your college?

Legend:
- Very important (dark blue)
- Somewhat important (light blue)
- Slightly important (gray)
- Not important at all (dark gray)

Factors listed (top to bottom):
- Access to military education benefits (e.g., GI Bill or military tuition assistance)*
- The college's reputation for being military-friendly among veterans or service members*
- Ability to transfer credits from a previous program
- The college's academic quality/reputation
- The college's reputation for strong job placement
- Ability to choose course delivery (virtual, hybrid, in-person) that fits my life
- Flexible scheduling (e.g., part-time, evening, weekends)
- The program was expedited or had an option to expedite
- Full-time program
- Length of program/time required for degree completion
- Access to financial support from the college, scholarship, or other source
- Cost of attendance
- Location (e.g. close to family/work)
- Access to affordable childcare other than on-campus facilities provided by the college
- On-campus childcare facilities or other childcare resources provided by the college
- Connections with former or current students
- Housing support
- Access to public benefits (i.e. SNAP, WIC, TANF, Medicaid)
- The college had supports specific to Adult Learners available
- Support from my employer
- Encouragement from friends or family
- Support from a non-profit or community-based organization

Note: these options were only presented to respondents who self-identified as a veteran.

Many interviewees also said they relied on various forms of financial support, including those provided directly by colleges, external organizations, state programs, or employer tuition reimbursement to make enrolling possible. For example, one interviewee, who was employed by a community college, reported being motivated to enroll after he learned his job enabled him to take two classes each semester for free. Although interviewees described financial aid to be crucial for funding tuition and, sometimes, living expenses, they typically described certain financial aid applications and processes as intimidating, confusing, and unclear.

Location, program modality, and flexible options—all of which help learners answer the question, *"Can I make this work with my life?"*—represent the other top decision factors. Seventy-nine percent of survey respondents reported that the college's physical location and proximity to family and/or work was somewhat or very important in their selection of that college, consistent with previous literature. Interviewees echoed this interest in geographical proximity and ease of commute. Several interviewees described beginning their search by looking at what colleges were nearby, saying that proximity allowed them to juggle other responsibilities such as work and childcare. One interviewee explained,

> *The way I chose were what was close to me. 'Cause I'm not trying to... There's a lot of traffic. I'm not trying to like drive forever. And like, like I said, I have my kid, I have to think about his schedule too. And I can't be like, "Here, take... Someone, take care of him," 'cause I don't have that money to be paying for someone to be watching him.*

Program characteristics and logistics also played a key role in learners' decisions about which college to attend. For survey respondents, length of program (83%), flexible scheduling options (78%), and the ability to choose course delivery modality (82%) were all important decision factors, along with the 82% who cited the ability to transfer credits. Some interviewees also described being influenced by logistical factors, such as whether they could take classes part time, whether the program was competency-based, and whether classes were online. In each case, interviewees were driven by which programs would be the most flexible and convenient for their specific situation. Crucially, though, some interviewees did not know this information as early as they would have liked to have it, noting that they sometimes learned key information, such as information about online courses or flexibility, much later in the process.

Finally, 65% of survey respondents shared that personal connections were an important factor in their decision to enroll in the institution they ultimately selected—including situations when someone enrolling at or working at that college were part of their ecosystem, as described in the previous section. These connections were disproportionately reported as important by adult learners of color, too. For example, William remembered being encouraged by a mentor to apply to more selective schools:

> *As a first-gen student, we, we, we lack that, and that's why at times I feel that we go the path of, of least resistance, which is a safety school because rejection feels really hard for us. So, he ended up forcing me to apply and I got into all the [institutions] that I applied to. Um, and when I got into [institution name], he was like, "You're going to [institution name], that's it. Like, forget [other institution], forget [other institution], you're going to [institution name]." And I applied and I got in.*

The decision factors listed so far remained the most important across all groups; in addition, other factors not yet listed here were disproportionately important among survey respondents who are adult learners of color. Those factors included the availability of childcare on campus and access to public benefits, both of which relate to financial support, or support for attaining a service that they could not afford on their own.

Again, information is key: Learners need access to trusted information to understand enrollment and application processes.

"Information brokers" emerged again as adult learners decided to enroll and sorted through how. In part because available information was so limited, or they didn't know where to go for information, many of our adult learners (who all successfully reenrolled) described a person in their lives who directed them to sources of information such as application and enrollment processes, financial aid, and program requirements. At this point in their journey, the interviewees sometimes cited new people serving in this role; in addition to friends, family, or coworkers they had known for a long time, and were still the most common sources, they added individuals from community-based organizations and institutional staff. These information brokers shaped the information and knowledge interviewees had about returning to college; in particular, this information and knowledge often shaped their perception of opportunities or understanding of programs that might be a good fit, in some cases expanding learners' perceptions of what was possible or feasible for them. In addition, these information brokers helped the interviewees with the complex administrative processes of applying and reenrolling, especially when those processes can be off-ramps that hold learners back. The interviewees' discussions of these people highlighted the important role of information brokers in navigating the complex processes of thinking about, understanding options, and ultimately contacting an institution.

The timing and quality of that information matters, too.

Overall, the learners in our study, who had successfully reenrolled in college, reported that they had good information about their institution during the application process. Eighty-six percent of learners reported that information was easy to find, 75% knew who to contact with questions during the application process, 85% could easily find information on institutions' websites, and 85% understood enrollment processes (see Exhibit 5). To understand how the quality of information during the application process was correlated with learners' satisfaction after enrolling, we created a scale for quality of information, using the variables described in this paragraph; this scale ranges from 1 to 4, with 4 being the highest quality of information. This information scale was positively correlated with learners' experiences in their courses, their programs, and their sense of belonging at their institutions after enrolling, reinforcing the importance of information at early stages.

EXHIBIT 5. INFORMATION DURING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Information about the college was easy to find.

88%

Overall, I understood the process of applying to/enrolling in this college.

85%

It was easy to find information about my specific program on the college's website.

85%

The processes and procedures for enrolling were convenient.

81%

A non-profit or community organization helped to support me through the applicatation.

80%

It was clear to me who to contact with questions as I considered applying or enrolling.

76%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

In contrast, lack of information can lead to confusion, false starts, or even unsuccessful application attempts, costing learners time and money. Some interviewees reported being initially rejected from the colleges they ultimately ended up attending. In each scenario, their rejection could be attributed to having a lack of information and understanding about the application process. For example, an interviewee who was accepted to his school but "rejected" or denied financial aid attributed this setback to difficulties with the actual process of filing for financial aid. Similarly, Charles, who was initially rejected from the university because of "errors on the application" shared his experience trying to appeal the decision. Charles explained that after formally appealing the decision several times and still being rejected, he "took it to another level" by soliciting assistance from an individual who was affiliated with both the college and with a campus organization helping formerly incarcerated individuals like himself:

We went to her, explained the situation. She said, you know what, I'll take care of it. Well, I get it, you know, we, we need you on campus and this and that. So I don't know what she did or who she talked to but, um, I got that email saying that, hey, you know, and guess what you are admitted to [the college].

KEY FINDINGS: CONNECTION

- Affordability, location, program modality, and flexible options are key decision factors when adult learners consider which institution to apply to.

- Information is key during the connection phase: Learners need access to trusted information to understand enrollment and application processes.

- The timing and quality of information learners receive during the connection phase is important.

(Re)Entry

Once adult learners have made connections, applied, and been accepted, they move to the (re)entry phase of their educational journey. The (re)entry phase, originally conceived as "entry" in the Loss/Momentum Framework, is the period from when learners first enroll to the completion of their first college-level course. Because many learners stop out in the first year of enrollment, this period is critical for supporting the transition to college and encouraging learners to enroll in a program of study through appropriate placement mechanisms and proactive advising.

For adult learners, this period is especially important, as many learners are entering postsecondary education after a long period in which they were not engaged in formal education, and this is when adult learners figure out whether taking classes "works" in their lives. Many adult learners, including the ones who participated in this study, have previously enrolled in postsecondary education, perhaps immediately following high school or at other points in their lives. Given these experiences, adult learners may find the transition into postsecondary education challenging, especially if they had previous experiences that negatively shaped their perceptions of postsecondary education.

In this section, we share findings related to how learners experience the transition (back) into postsecondary education and the ways that institutions may be able to support them.

Two common barriers involve navigating institutions' complex systems and learners' self-perceptions of academic preparation.

For adult learners (re)enrolling in postsecondary education, the onboarding experience was challenging for many learners, as it required them to learn how to navigate institutions' systems and processes and (re)acclimate to the college experience. Eric's reflections on navigating course requirements at entry illustrate this challenge:

> *One experience that I criticize heavily about college is, it's so difficult if you're like a newcomer to know what you're supposed to take, what the exact requirements are. Oh, but for this thing is this requirement and this thing, oh, you gotta take this class. You know, they throw a lot of numbers at you and then the class number this. I understand, I work in the systems. I understand why is to keep it organized, but someone who's outside of that, it's, it's very confusing. Especially if you don't have someone to kind of hold your hand and say, "Okay, you need to do this, this, this."*

Most of our interviewees cited some kind of challenge understanding course requirements or navigating the various resources or offices, with some describing being sent to several offices for different information, or being told that they needed to seek out information. Like Eric, several pointed to specific people that helped them navigate information, but they still thought processes were unnecessarily confusing.

Interviewees also cited their own academic preparation as a concern or source of nervousness (a factor that may also affect earlier decision-making, too). Forty-four percent of learners reported that they felt their lack of confidence in their academic preparation was somewhat or very challenging for them, with another 23% saying it was "a little" challenging for them (see Exhibit 6).

Even for learners who may have felt more confident in their academic preparation, placement into developmental coursework may hinder their confidence or momentum.

EXHIBIT 6. BARRIERS LEARNERS FACED IN COLLEGE

Most of the other students were traditional-aged; there were few other Adult Learners in my program

60%

Being able to afford college tuition, room and board or other financial constraints

52%

Not feeling confident in my academic ability.

44%

I have too many family obligations.

38%

Classes are/were scheduled during inconvenient times.

34%

Finding affordable childcare.

30%

Getting to campus.

24%

Access to stable housing.

23%

Access to technology such as a laptop, computer, wifi, or other needed technology

20%

Difficulty using a computer, software (e.g., Excel, PowerPoint, Word), or other technology

20%

My work is not supportive of my school schedule.

19%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Orientation and transition programs support adult learners' transitions, particularly by building networks.

Some adult learners engaged with orientation as a support as they enrolled in their institutions. About a third (30%) of learners reported that they participated in orientation when (re)enrolling. Of those, 70% thought that orientation was helpful; adult learners of color generally reported finding orientation to be helpful at higher rates than White adult learners. Some learners shared their experiences with reentry programs specifically designed for adult learners, too; the value was typically characterized as centering on the network they could build (citing the opportunity to create a sense of community among adult learners), rather than the specific information included. As Nancy described: *"Reentry [program] is so helpful; reentry was my spot. They were... it's where I found my community."*

About half of learners received credit for transfer credits or prior learning assessment, though more expected to do so when choosing to enroll in their current college.

The majority of the interview and survey sample had enrolled in postsecondary education previously. Of those, 82% reported the ability to transfer credits as an important factor in selecting a college; however, only 51% of respondents said that they had the opportunity to receive credit for content, courses, or skills they had acquired through those previous experiences. The most common way that credit was awarded was through transfer credits; of all respondents who had successfully received any credit, 90% cited transfer credit as the type of credit they received, distinct from prior learning assessment. This important gap highlights an important point about availability and timing of information; anyone seeking to transfer credits typically only receives confirmed information about transfer credit awards after they enroll, and at least one interviewee experienced learning too late that some of their credits would not transfer.

KEY FINDINGS: CONNECTION

- Two common challenges during the (re)entry phase involve navigating institutions' complex systems and learners' self-perceptions of academic preparation.

- Orientation and transition programs support adult learners' transitions into postsecondary education, particularly by building networks.

- About half of learners received credit for transfer credits or prior learning assessment; however, more learners expected that they would receive credit when choosing to enroll in their current college but did not.

Progress

In the Loss/Momentum Framework, the Progress phase represents the period after learners have transitioned into the courses aligned to their program of study (the Connection phase) and until they meet 75% of requirement completion. This represents the majority of the time a learner is enrolled, typically, including taking courses, engaging with student affairs and support services, and continuing to live the rest of their lives.

For adult learners, this phase is important because even seemingly small life events or academic challenges can disrupt or reorient their paths, as many of our interviewees had experienced during previous enrollment periods. In addition, for some adult learners who enroll part time to balance school alongside their other commitments, this period is longer than for students who might enroll full time, further increasing the likelihood that some kind of disruption or change might interrupt their progress or simply make it more challenging to plan their academic journey confidently.

This section presents findings on the experiences of our interviewees once enrolled and on the path toward their degree (again), including program elements that made progress possible, key supports, and their sense of belonging or isolation as an adult learner.

A consistent interest among adult learners is making college "work" with the rest of their lives; most are interested in flexible or self-driven schedules.

Echoing findings described in previous sections, interviewees consistently described an interest in enrolling in courses or programs that "work," logistically, with the rest of their lives, including jobs, childcare, and other responsibilities. Some described a preference for consistent flexibility (i.e., all courses offering flexibility by design); others described a need for predictable scheduling each term that fits in their windows of availability.

Interviewees who had the option of self-paced or flexibly paced programs or courses considered these useful and noted that they "don't waste my time." Interviewees in such programs described these as allowing them to work at a time that works for them, and to adjust their schedules when required by other aspects of their lives *without withdrawing*, including when work gets busy or something unexpected happens with their family. Even if full flexibility is not feasible, one interviewee discussed the importance of flexible deadlines and courses that take adults' lives into account, explaining, *"Maybe just don't expect them to be, you know, every two or three days something has to be turned in by 12 o'clock kinda thing, because it's, I feel like that's hard for somebody that works and has a family."* Several described the importance of specific weekend days as their day to complete course-related activities.

Those who did not have access to flexible options often reported experiencing challenges around scheduling, with the majority describing conflicting work and family responsibilities, and a smaller group reporting issues with transportation or lack of available course offerings at times that worked for their childcare and work responsibilities. Survey responses to factors that influenced their class schedules echoed this list, with 75% citing balancing work or employment, 62% citing commute time, 52% citing family obligations other than childcare, and 50% citing childcare. Black survey respondents and Hispanic/Latino respondents were particularly likely to identify family obligations, childcare, and commute time as factors influencing their decision to take classes in person or online (see Exhibit 7).
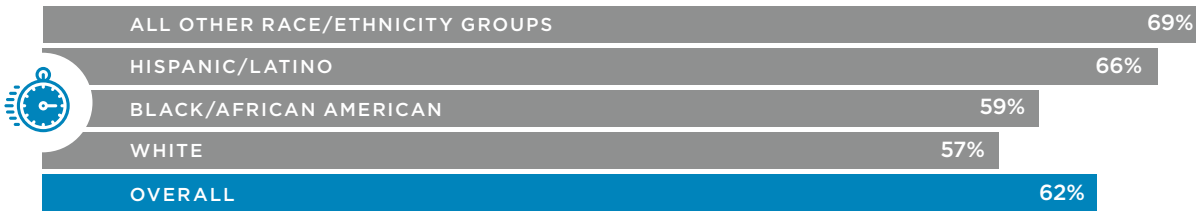
EXHIBIT 7. COURSE SCHEDULING DECISIONS

To what extent did any of the following factors influence your decisions about your class schedule or whether you took online versus in-person classes?
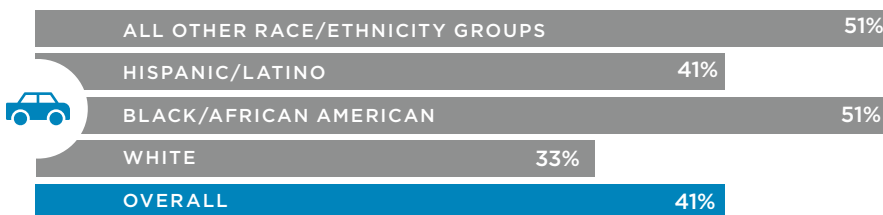
Balancing Work or Employment

ALL OTHER RACE/ETHNICITY GROUPS	75%
HISPANIC/LATINO	73%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	76%
WHITE	76%
OVERALL	79%

Commute Time

ALL OTHER RACE/ETHNICITY GROUPS	69%
HISPANIC/LATINO	66%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	59%
WHITE	57%
OVERALL	62%

Family Obligations Other Than Childcare

ALL OTHER RACE/ETHNICITY GROUPS	54%
HISPANIC/LATINO	59%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	50%
WHITE	48%
OVERALL	52%

Childcare

ALL OTHER RACE/ETHNICITY GROUPS	50%
HISPANIC/LATINO	59%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	40%
WHITE	39%
OVERALL	50%

Access to Transportation

ALL OTHER RACE/ETHNICITY GROUPS	51%
HISPANIC/LATINO	41%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	51%
WHITE	33%
OVERALL	41%

Campus Activities

ALL OTHER RACE/ETHNICITY	26%
HISPANIC/LATINO	24%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	27%
WHITE	14%
OVERALL	21%
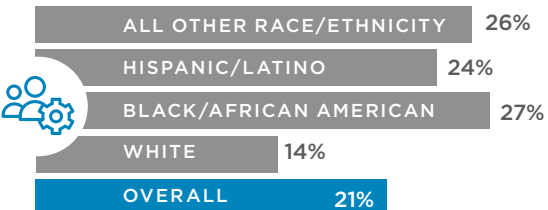
In some situations, these priorities can limit the course options available to adult learners. Julia, an interviewee who attended in-person/face-to-face courses, described:

> 💬 *I have to make sure my classes are around my son's schedule. Like make sure it starts after I drop him off. Make sure it ends before he comes outta school. Like I have to give myself time to get home or get to school.*

In terms of program modalities, survey respondents most commonly enrolled in (41%), and reported they preferred (50%), a mix of online and in-person courses. There were, however, sizable shares who both enrolled in and preferred exclusively online or exclusively in-person/face-to-face courses (see Exhibit 8), with exclusively in-person/face-to-face being the least commonly preferred option. It is clear that no one modality suits all, but there is demand for both online and in-person/face-to-face options that fit learners' lives.

EXHIBIT 8. MODALITY

What classes **do you take?**
If you had the option, what type of classes would you **prefer to take?**

	Exclusively Online Classes	Hybrid	Exclusively In-Person Classes
Do you take	35%	41%	24%
Prefer	35%	50%	14%
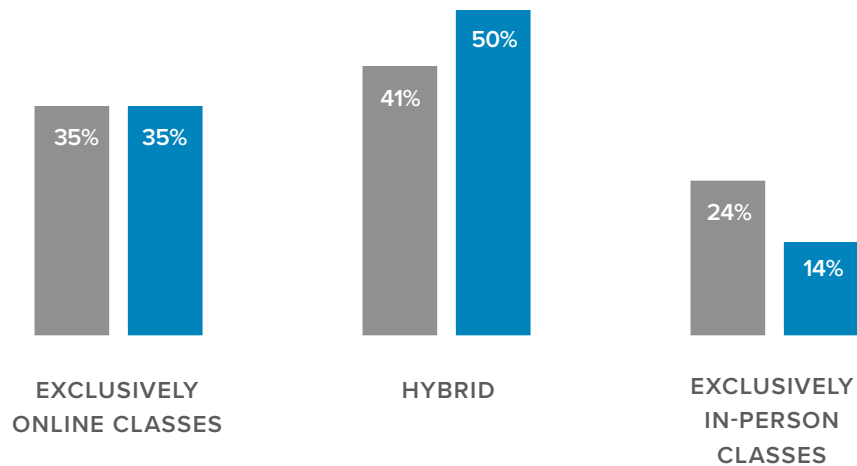
Note: Responses do not sum to exactly 100 because of a small number of "Other" responses.

Adult learners reflected on assets that helped them navigate their current path, such as the maturity, self-awareness, and growth that comes from life and work experience.

Several interviewees attributed their successes in college to their perceived maturity and personal growth resulting from life experience, contrasting that to the version of themselves when they graduated high school. For example, one interviewee described how she was likely not ready for college when she was younger but now, as a mother, understood the importance of completing her program. Other interviewees described how their life experience has helped them identify their desired majors and/or have the discipline required for the flexible programs they sought out. Ultimately, both interviewees and survey respondents recognized how their age and accumulated life experiences provided them with an advantage over traditionally-aged students in terms of context and perspective, saying:

> *Just simply being over 40 gave me a significant advantage over the much younger other undergrad students. My history living in multiple areas of the world and those things I merely learned naturally throughout the years of my life gave me the information and expertise that the other students had to acquire via studying the materials.*

While adult learners generally reported feeling supported in the classroom by faculty and peers, they also reported that being one of very few adult learners was a challenge.

88% of survey respondents reported that their instructors respected the lives of their students outside the classroom, a key highlight considering their emphasis on making college work with their lives. Qualitative findings align with these experiences, with six interviewees sharing that they received support from their faculty or instructors.

In contrast, while survey results generally indicated that respondents felt a sense of belonging at their college, over half of respondents (60%) reported that the lack of other adult learners in the classroom was a challenge. Supporting that sentiment, interviewees described feeling isolated or unsupported when there were very few other adult learners in their courses, whereas those with a substantial number of adult learners in their courses often cited the influence of these classmates as their support network. More specifically, two interviewees described feeling like "imposter," with one describing having "imposter syndrome" from being an adult learner, a person of color, *and* a transfer student. Another interviewee described feeling "unwanted" on their campus due to their age and social expectations, explaining:

> *And the sense of isolation because you're an older person, even in community college, I was still the older person, of like, "Why are you here? Like, you should be like working a job, you should be having kids, you should be, you should be in that stage of your life now. So, you being here, you're, like, just taking up space for someone else.*

Interviewees described the importance of various types of adult-specific or identity-relevant supports that helped them develop some sense of belonging and supported their progress.

Consistent with prior previous literature (Kasworm, 2010), our findings emphasize that supports and resources tailored to their interests, needs, or identity matter. Interviewees who described having access to these supports shared how affirming they could be, especially affinity groups for adult learners and/or racial/ethnic communities (for example, programs that tailor supports and networking for Black students). One interviewee also talked about how a specific program centered around students reentering from prison helped her form a community and build resilience, saying:

And then here at [institution], it's just been the reentry program that has really helped me get through, a lot of the difficulties, a lot of the transitions that I've had to go through. And the community that I've built within that reentry program, certain people, they've just become like really good friends and mine and without them, yeah, I don't think I would've been able to (laughs), to do what I do, I guess.

Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments, including examples in which specific professors served similar roles. For example, one interviewee described how a professor of hers, who became a mentor to her, helped her reconnect to her Hispanic/Latino identity and ultimately pursue a career around supporting Hispanic/Latino communities, saying, *"I just didn't think that it was especially so late in the experience and I felt so lost, but I ended up finding, like, my identity within those classes, with her class. Like, I became super passionate about elevating, you know, myself at some point, but the community as a whole."*

KEY FINDINGS: PROGRESS

- A consistent interest among adult learners is making college "work" with the rest of their lives; most are interested in flexible or self-driven schedules, but their preferences for program modality vary by their specific circumstances.

- Both interviewees and survey respondents reflected on the unique assets they bring as adult learners that helped them navigate their current path, such as the maturity, self-awareness, and growth that comes from life and work experience.

- Although adult learners generally reported feeling supported "in the classroom" by faculty and peers, they also reported that being one of very few adult learners was a challenge.

- Interviewees described the importance of various types of adult-specific or identity-relevant supports that helped them develop some sense of belonging and supported their progress Immediate labor market value of a degree is a key goal for some, but not all, adult learners; many did not necessarily expect to take on a new job or get promoted immediately following graduation.

Completion/Transition

The Loss/Momentum Framework closes with completion or transition, describing the completion of a program of study to a credential with labor market value and transitioning to the labor market. Our interviewees had not completed at the time of interviewing, so most did not speak to this transition, other than to say that completing their degree was an important goal.

Transition for adult learners may be less straightforward than for traditionally aged students; for adult learners, they are not moving to a first job, and may have been employed all along, meaning they may be looking to career services for different support.

Immediate labor market value of a degree is a key goal for some, but not all, adult learners; many did not necessarily expect to take on a new job or get promoted immediately following graduation. Several interviewees reported that the majors offered became part of their selection of a college, which reflects the importance of career outcomes for some; for example, Susan described declining an admission offer after learning that they did not offer her major, because she *"needed a business degree; psychology doesn't do it for me now."*

Our previously discussed findings, though, are important to revisit: Many interviewees described that they were not necessarily looking for new jobs upon completion of their degrees. Some were enrolled, as described in previous sections, to earn a degree that would allow them to meet the requirements for their current position. Others were not completing a degree for a specific, work-oriented purpose at all; instead, they were trying to achieve a personal goal or commitment they had set for themselves. For others, they hoped a degree would make them eligible for future promotion, even though that may not be immediately upon completing their degrees.

KEY FINDING: COMPLETION/TRANSITION

Immediate labor market value of a degree is a key goal for some, but not all, adult learners; many did not necessarily expect to take on a new job or get promoted immediately following graduation.

Conclusion and Implications
for Interested Institutions

This exploratory work covered a range of topics, following the stories and journeys of our adult learners of color. While many of our findings echo other work on adult learners in general, this report is unique in that it takes a longitudinal view of the adult learners' experiences and:

- Explores the way that 'shaping experiences' from high school and prior influence adult learners' decisions today, particularly by informing whether and how they think of (and trust) college as "for" them;

- Frames the "pre-(re-)entry" and connection decision-making period, including the kinds of considerations they had and the information they wanted (and did or didn't receive) about whether college can "work with their lives," as well as the catalysts that prompt them to enroll; and

- Explores the role of ecosystems (or networks) in providing information, especially in lieu of formal information from colleges that addresses their most pressing questions.

Finally, our findings also align with the literature about the range of motivations adults have for returning to college, their experiences navigating the plethora of administrative hurdles and complex processes to successfully enroll, and their experiences navigating progression through their programs while balancing their life and work commitments—including the importance of flexibility or predictability, as well as community and adult-specific or culturally-specific support.

Beyond the specific findings and implications highlighted throughout, we conclude with cross-cutting themes that point to implications for practitioners or researchers seeking to make changes to institutional structures, practices, and processes that better support adult learners of color. Where feasible, we identify options that might serve as first steps (particularly for institutions starting out that may only be equipped to add a person or a specific service like coaching), or options that move toward system-level change (addressing the underlying barriers by changing a more fundamental design of the institution, such as scheduling and program models). Not every institution is well-positioned to address root causes, so we identify a range of potential options.
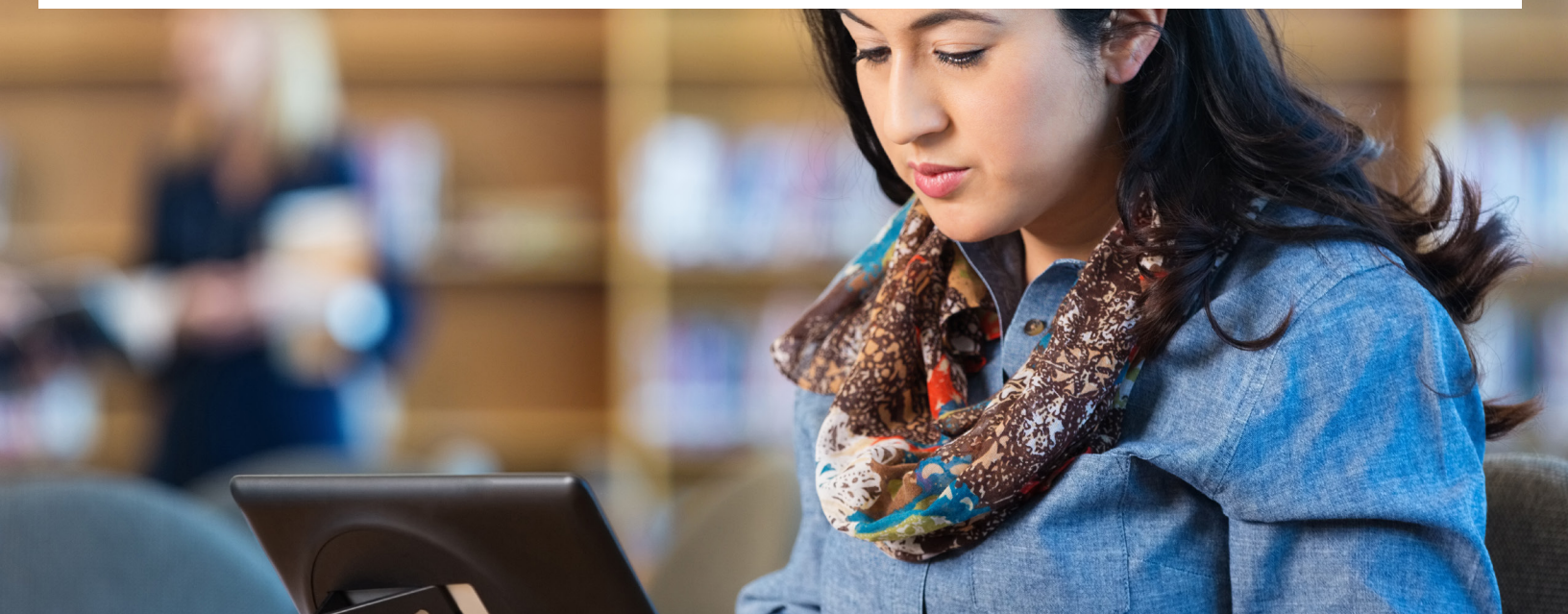
Cross-Cutting Themes

Understanding the decision-making process of adult learners of color is crucial for institutions to create and implement effective recruitment and support strategies.

- Adult learners of color can consider enrolling for an extended period of time before making an enrollment decision. Their decision-making is often about whether and when to attend—considerations that can take a long time—rather than choosing where to attend at any specific moment. Critically, institutions do not "see" these periods, until or unless an adult learner reaches out.

- Many of their top concerns, questions, and preferences center on whether they can make college "work" in their lives—financially, logistically, and socially. These findings highlight the role of information, particularly the timing of that information: many adult learners described not learning about key information related to program models prior to enrolling, unless they found a specialized program that was designed and marketed specifically for adult learners (often including emphases of flexibility or predictability, as well as modalities).

It's also important to understand other factors shaping their decisions and perceptions, which may influence outreach channels and opportunities.

- Learners' ecosystems shape the information and encouragement they receive, playing a critical role in their extended decision-making process. "Information brokers," in particular, are an important resource throughout their journeys.

- Many adult learners may have adverse prior experiences with postsecondary education or might have received negative messages from K–12 teachers or counselors about whether they were "college material." These experiences shape whether they think college is "for" them and whether they will feel welcomed.

Finally, their decision process doesn't end with enrollment—it continues even when they've chosen and started attending college. This decision-making process extends through to degree completion; even when they have built momentum, (re)enrolling each term can feel like a new active decision, rather than a default choice—affecting retention and stopout decisions by adults.

Implications: How can institutions better invite, retain, and support adult learners of color?

Institutions can design outreach and supports specifically for adult learners, and particularly adult learners of color, with an eye toward identifying and addressing potential sources of inequity.

- Institutions can design outreach and supports specifically for adult learners, and particularly adult learners of color, with an eye toward identifying and addressing potential sources of inequity.

- Institutions can create outreach strategies and public-facing information that communicates key information that addresses the concerns and interests of this population, given that learners are likely considering college long before they ever contact an institution.

- Institutions can share information on websites and other channels that address questions and difficulties that adult learners of color may have experienced, including previous negative experiences with higher education (including discrimination, hostile racial climates, or other situations where faculty, staff, or other students implied that they did not belong).

  — *For example,* admissions information on college and university websites often is geared toward traditionally aged students; providing additional content specifically tailored to the concerns that may persist for adult learners throughout their life may make them more confident about enrolling. These might include intentionally highlighting commitments to a welcoming climate, providing assurances that faculty value and engage with adult learners, and even highlighting that there may have been valid reasons to stop out before, but that your college will work with them to support their success.

- Institutions can have affinity group representatives or current adult learners reach out to adult learners of color to act as a resource and share personal experiences.

  — Current adult learners can proactively help prospective adult learners feel confident that others like them have been able to navigate and make it work. Such a network can also support the ongoing re-enrollment decisions of each adult learner each term, by supporting each other in times when it is challenging to balance courses and other roles.

Because high schools do not serve as a point of contact for adult learners, institutions need to identify new venues and opportunities for reaching potential adult learners who might be considering (re)enrollment. This process can include outreach strategies through community partners or workplaces.

Administrators, faculty, and staff can make changes to program models and consider ways to publicize and communicate those changes proactively and in ways that resonate with adult learners of color.

- Avoid assuming that adults universally understand what "being in college" looks like at your campus, and whether that fits with their lives.

- To help adult learners of color decide whether college will "work" for them, institutions can publicize information about any scheduling flexibility the institution offers, and/or whether they offer predictable schedules and at what time of day.

  — *For example,* assurances that all the classes a student needs will be available during the evening hours might be more predictable for adult learners than notes that you offer some evening classes. It is crucial that anything communicated is true of the full learner experience (or program), rather than offered on a course-by-course basis.

  — Even if the institution does not have a specific adult-friendly schedule, adult learners might benefit from institutions making clear what the options for modality (online, face to face, hybrid) are, so they know what to expect.

- If adult-friendly scheduling doesn't currently exist, institutions should consider reevaluating course scheduling practices and pursue either flexible or predictable schedules; this could include both course timing and term lengths, as well as more holistic approaches such as competency-based education programs.

- Institutions can add support services that help reduce scheduling issues for adult learners, including additional financial aid (possibly allowing some adult learners to work less while enrolled), or offering on-campus childcare, camps, or other resources to address childcare-related time constraints.

- Consider sharing information on websites and other channels that address questions or concerns that members of an adult learner's ecosystem might have.

  — *For instance,* examples from other adult learners about how they successfully balanced parenting and enrollment might assuage concerns of an adult learner's family members. Or, institutions can consider communications campaigns directed at changing perceptions in their communities about who is welcome at this institution.

Institutions can assess their own processes and reduce offramps for both learner-initiated or school-initiated contacts.

- Complex processes can delay decision making or enrollment, so auditing websites, communications, resources, and processes for prospective adult learners with our findings in mind might surface additional opportunities for improvement.

- Alternatively, staff or faculty can conduct interviews with your institution's current or prospective adult learners about their consideration and decision making processes, including the information and processes that helped or hindered their decisions to enroll.

- If a communications and process audit is not feasible, consider clarifying a key point of contact for adult learners. Ideally, this person would be reachable through multiple channels, and it would be clear that prospective adult learners can reach out with questions. This person could translate the institution's complex processes and support adult learners in obtaining the information they need.

Appendix A
Methodology

The interview protocol included a limited set of prompts focused on asking the interviewees to start by describing their early life exposure to and perceptions of higher education; decision factors starting in middle or high school and through the point of current enrollment; and holistic reflections on their postsecondary educational journeys. The interview included a limited set of probes focused on uncovering how and whether factors related to program models were salient for them.

The study team conducted analysis in two phases, aimed at informing the design of the subsequent survey and developing insights contained in this report:

1. The first phase analysis used a grounded theory approach; although our goal was not necessarily to develop a new theory, this approach allowed us to discover themes and findings emerging from the data to (a) frame and inform questions to include on the survey questionnaire, and (b) for exploring findings from this report (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

2. The second phase of analysis explored the interview data using thematic analysis heavily informed by Iloh's Model of College-Going Decision and Trajectories (2019, 2021). That framework's assertions about decision making as a broader process than choice, as well as the constructs of time, information, and opportunity, allowed us to categorize factors and findings from the data.

We began by familiarizing ourselves with the qualitative data by reading interview transcripts and collaboratively developing a codebook to include initial themes related to the guiding research questions being addressed by this analysis. Following calibration exercises, we then coded interview data and identified key themes that addressed the study's research question. Following a memo-writing process, the full team discussed the framing and content of findings as part of all-team analysis meetings, resulting in the findings included in this report.

To recruit learners to participate in the survey, we partnered with postsecondary institutions that enroll a large share of adult learners—especially those that enroll many adult learners of color— that could share the survey with their learners. We also invited learners who had participated in narrative interviews or had indicated that they were interested but were not selected or were unable to participate in an interview. Survey participants were entered into a raffle to win $50 Amazon gift cards to acknowledge their time. Although we focused interview analysis on interviews with only adult learners of color, the survey was made available to any adult learners—adult learners of color or White adult learners—for participation. Because surveys capture the perspectives of a larger sample, we viewed the survey as an opportunity to better understand whether there are important differences between the experiences of adult learners of color and White learners in postsecondary education. A larger sample also allows us to look for statistically significant differences in response patterns between different groups of learners.

References

Bennett, V. & Steinberg, A. (2022, March 22). Navigating the maze of short-term credentials to boost young adult talent. *Jobs for the Future*. https://jfforg-new-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Navigating_the_Maze_of__Short-Term_Credentials_to_Boost_Young_Adult_Talent.pdf

Choitz, V., & Prince, H. (2008). *Flexible learning options for adult students.* U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. https://nationalfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FlexibleLearning.pdf

Chapman, D.W. (1981). A model of student college choice. *The Journal of Higher Education, 52*(5), 490–505. https://doi.org/10.2307/1981837

Chicago Beyond. (2019). Why am I always being researched? A guidebook for community organizations, researchers, and funders to help us get from insufficient understanding to more authentic truth. *Chicago Beyond Equity Series, Volume One.* https://chicagobeyond.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ChicagoBeyond_2019Guidebook.pdf

Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded theory research: A design framework for novice researchers. *SAGE Open Medicine, 7*, 2050312118822927. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927

Cooker, A. D. (2003) African American female adult learners: Motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. *Journal of Black Studies, 33*(5), 654–672. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934703033005007

Donaldson, S. (2022, April 4). Colleges are trying to re-enroll adult learners who dropped out. Here's how it's going. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-are-trying-to-re-enroll-adult-learners-who-dropped-out-heres-how-its-going

Edmonds, W., & Kennedy, T. (2017). An applied guide to research designs. SAGE Publications, Inc, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802779

Emmanuel, J. N. (2023). Affordability In college access: Improving equitable value for low-income, first generation, and students of color. *The Vermont Connection, 44*(1). https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/ vol44/iss1/17

Gallagher, K. S., & Hossler, D. (1987). Graduation rates in higher education programs: What enrollment trends show. *The Review of Higher Education, 10*(4), 369–372. http://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.1987.0015

Garcia, G. A. (2019). *Becoming Hispanic-serving institutions: Opportunities for colleges and universities.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Gardner, A. C., Maietta, H. N., Gardner, P. D., & Perkins, N. (2022). Postsecondary adult learner motivation: An analysis of credentialing patterns and decision making within higher education programs. *Adult Learning, 33*(1), 15–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159520988361

Garza, A. L. (2011). *Adult Latino college students: Experiencias y la educación.* Texas State University-San Marcos. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED539017

Harris, A. (2021). *The state must provide: Why America's colleges have always been unequal—and how to set them right.* Ecco.

Home, A. M. (1998). Predicting role conflict, overload and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs. *Adult education quarterly, 48*(2), 85–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369804800204

Hunte, R., Mehrotra, G. R., Mosier, M., Skuratowicz, E., Sanders, K., Cherry, K., & Gooding, A. (2020). *Exploring experiences of postsecondary education for adult learners from communities of color in Oregon.* Higher Education Coordinating Commission, State of Oregon. https://www.oregon.gov/highered/research/Documents/Reports/HECC-Adult-Learner-report-2020.pdf

Iloh, C. (2009). An alternative to college "choice" models and frameworks: The Iloh model of college-going decisions and trajectories. *Coll. Univ. 94*, 2–9. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1236170

Iloh, C. (2021). The broken yellow brick road: A narrative exploration of the college-going decisions and trajectory of a low-income single mother of color. *Education Sciences, 11*(10), 601. MDPI AG. http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/educsci11100601

Jain, D., & Crisp, G. (2018). *Creating inclusive and equitable environments for racially minoritized adult learners: Recommendations for research, policy, and practice.* ASHE-NITE Paper Series. https://nite-education.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Creating-Inclusive-and-Equitable-environments-for-racially-minoritized-adult-learners-FINAL.pdf

Jones, W.A. (Forthcoming). Adult college (re)enrollment advice & information networks: A descriptive analysis.

Kasworm, C. E., Sandmann, L. R., & Sissel, P. A. (2000). Adult learners in higher education. *Handbook of adult and continuing education*, 449–463. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313553209_Adult_learners_in_higher_education

Kasworm, C. (2005). Adult student identity in an intergenerational community college classroom. *Adult Education Quarterly, 56*(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713605280148

Kasworm, C. E. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly, 60*(2), 143–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609336110

Klein-Collins, B. (2020). Considering the adult learner at Hispanic-serving institutions. *Explorations in Adult Higher Education, 6*, 24–35.

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2023). *Some College, No Credential student outcomes: Annual progress report—academic year 2021/22.* https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/

Nava, M. S., Del-Rayo Nava, L., & Nava, A. (2023). Los Nava: Testimonios of three first-generation siblings and their college going decisions. *The Vermont Connection, 44*(1). https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/ vol44/iss1/24

Niu, S. X. & Tienda, M. (2008). Choosing colleges: Identifying and modeling college choice sets. *Social Science Research, 37*(2), 416–433. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.06.015

Nuriddin-Little, A. H. (2020). *The forgotten voices: African American male adult learners and their experiences in higher education.* Rowan University. https://rdw.rowan.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3797&context=etd

Patterson, M. B. (2018). The forgotten 90%: Adult nonparticipation in education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 68*(1), 41–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713617731810

Pérez, D., Zamora, B. T., & Pontious, M. W. (2018). Capitalizing on interpersonal thriving: Exploring the community cultural wealth in Latino undergraduate men's peer networks. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, 30*(1), 11–31. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1174865

Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*, 99–157. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4512-3_3

Rassen, E., Chaplot, P., Jenkins, D., Johnstone, R. (2013). *Understanding the student experience through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the path to completion.* Community College Research Center. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/understanding-student-experience-cbd.pdf

Ross-Gordon, J. (2005). The adult learner of color: An overlooked college student population. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 53*(2), 2–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377366.2005.10400064

Sosulski, M. R., Buchanan, N. T., & Donnell, C. M. (2010). Life history and narrative analysis: Feminist methodologies contextualizing black women's experiences with severe mental illness. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 37*(3), 29–58. http://dx.doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3534

U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Educational attainment in the United States: 2021.* https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2021/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html

AIR®

Lumina FOUNDATION™

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. AIR's work is driven by its mission to generate and use rigorous evidence that contributes to a better, more equitable world. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit AIR.ORG.

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis, Indiana, that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy. For more information, please see www.luminafoundation.org.