ABOUND
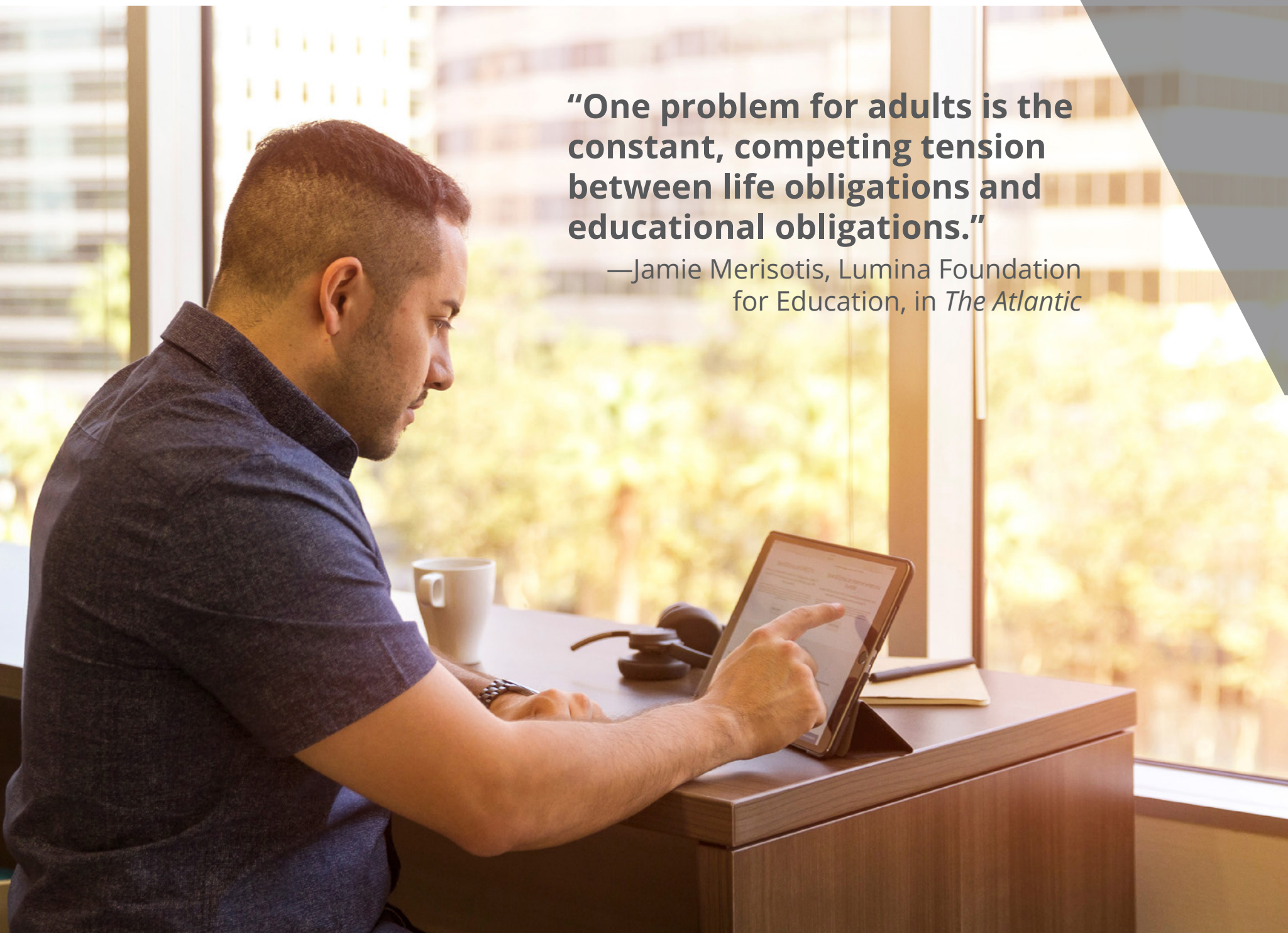
degrees of opportunity

Reaching the "New Normal"

Understanding Adult Learners and Attracting Them to Your Institution

"One problem for adults is the constant, competing tension between life obligations and educational obligations."

—Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation for Education, in *The Atlantic*

Contents

Introduction: Who Adult Learners are and What's Motivating Them

If your institution is like many others in the U.S., you're facing a [projected wane in enrollments among traditional students](#) and looking to students over the age of 25 to expand your enrollment pipelines, your graduates, and your revenue.

With the bachelor's degree being the de facto table stakes of the 21st-century workforce, the country's adult learner market is certainly a viable one: about 80 million people ages 25 through 65 have graduated from high school but don't have a college degree. Another 15 million have an associate degree but no bachelor's.

When it comes to returning to college, this is an audience that doesn't need much convincing. Abound member [Champlain College](#) [surveyed](#) a randomized, nationally representative sample of 1,004 US adults between the ages of 23 and 55. Six out of ten respondents said that they have considered returning to school to complete a certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree. Two-thirds said they believed in higher education's effectiveness in preparing adults to succeed in the workforce.

The hangover from the Great Recession still persists for millions of Americans in the form of [jobs that haven't returned](#), leaving many adults looking to higher education to assist with career pivots. Meanwhile, unfilled jobs in the U.S. are coming off of record highs last summer at [nearly 6 million](#). Of Champlain's respondents who said they're considering a return to college, 56% said they wanted to change careers.

Beyond career mobility, more personal factors come into play in motivating adults to consider returning to college.

"At Chestnut Hill College, adult students report the two main reasons why they seek degree completion is to satisfy a personal goal and/or to serve as a positive role model for their children," says Elaine Green, Dean of Chestnut Hill College's School of Continuing and Professional Studies.

These 25-and-older students are increasingly the new normal and comprise about one-third of the college-going population in the U.S. While the number of degree-seeking students under the age of 25 has grown at a higher rate than the adult population, the National Center for Education Statistics projects that the adult population of degree-seekers will outpace traditional students' growth in the coming years. NCES projects that by 2020 the gap will narrow to 10.7 million adult learners and 13.1 million traditional (18- to 21-year-old) learners.

It's also perhaps one of the most hotly contested student segments, with micro-credentials, corporate learning, and Netflix-style ecosystems of curated learning environments moving in to compete with higher ed's mix of on-ground, online, and hybrid programs.

This burgeoning demographic presents fresh challenges to institutions long focused on traditional students, as adults bring with them uniquely different experiences and expectations. This is the first in a series of publications in which we'll explore the adult learner market and share collected knowledge on what works best to attract, retain and graduate adult students.

National Imperative to Increase Graduates in the Workforce

The race to attract adult students extends beyond each institution's individual goal for increased enrollments and return on investment. In 2014, Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce projected that, by 2020, the United States would leave unfilled 5 million jobs that require postsecondary education.

And, based on National Student Clearinghouse research, the country simply cannot achieve these numbers by relying on the diminishing flow of graduating high school students. In *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, Nathan D. Grawe, a professor of economics at Carleton College, presents a more dire picture of traditional-age students in the future. Grawe's analysis shows that the 2008 financial crisis caused many families to delay having children, projecting a 10% decline in the number of 18-year-olds by 2029.

Understanding the differences between adult learners and traditional students is critical to successfully attracting, recruiting, retaining, and ultimately graduating older students. Let's look at who these students are.

Pragmatic Workers Balancing Life's Many Logistics

Unlike younger students who may wander through multiple majors, committed adults typically know how (or can be easily coached) to decide which programs will help them meet their career goals and provide creden-

tials that boost their earning power or value in the marketplace. If you are savvy in your adult recruitment practices, you'll be rewarded with an influx of pragmatic students who are clear about what they hope to achieve from the degree they are earning.

For all the advantages of enrolling these motivated students, the tradeoff colleges face is in helping them balance their education goals with the demands of their very busy lives. This is often a more significant factor in adult attrition out than their struggles in the classroom. In her research on adult learners in the AAC&U Peer Review, Jovita Ross-Gordon reminds us that while most students today work at least part time, the vast majority of adult learners are working full time and are often married and have family obligations in addition to their jobs, all of which compete with educational goals and may force them to attend college or universities part time.

On top of the time-based and priority-balancing challenges, non-cognitive challenges may also prevail, such as a sense of belonging for first-generation learners. Financial concerns can also loom large as many adults are self-funding and squeezing money from mortgages and child rearing costs to pay tuition and fees.

"Adult students, who have been out of school for ten years or more and who have fewer than fifteen transfer credits, may experience additional challenges when returning to college," says Chestnut Hill's Green. "These challenges include; but are not limited to; technological advances, new teaching and learning formats, and changing student expectations."

Their learning styles and expectations are also different from those of traditional students. Adult students tend to "view the structure of education differently than do traditional students," says [Dr. Susan Aldridge](#), a long-time advocate for adult learning at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

"Because they are older and working, they tend to go to school part time," Aldridge says. "Adult students have a difficult time with the traditional format and structure—length of semesters, parking on the campus, getting to a traditional campus with a traditional schedule from their place of work."

Acknowledging these constraints, Complete College America has been [rethinking the 15-to-finish campaign](#) it has championed. In its recent publication, [A Better Deal](#), CCA argues that "students who take 1-2 classes at a time can still graduate on time if those courses are delivered on an accelerated timeline."

Indeed, around the country, colleges have figured out that the challenge of giving adult learners an efficient path to graduation lies not with the number 15 (hours), but 5, as in courses: how to help students squeeze in the same amount of courses through redesigned schedules with shorter terms, with enrollment offered year round.

Now that we've looked at adult learners' concerns and motivations, we'll explore **Five Questions Adult Learners Are Asking** and, later, **Ten Marketing Tips for Attracting Adult Learners.** Both segments will feature examples and insights from members of Abound's community of practice.

Five Questions Adult Learners Are Asking

In the previous section, we explored the demographics and motivations among prospective adult students. We're going to go a layer deeper to explore what questions adult learners have and what they want in a college or university, along with some suggestions for how to respond. We hope these insights will help your institution to attract and better serve them.

The research points to five predominant concerns:

1. Is this program flexible enough in time and location to fit my life?

Flexibility and cost are key. Generally, the institutions that appeal the most to this wave of students are those that offer online, weekend, evening, and hybrid learning environments that provide students with flexibility and portability in their studies. Credit for prior learning or experience are key as well, as they create real momentum for a student population that struggles the most to overcome the confidence gap. It's important to distinguish here that adult learners are not looking for *easy classes*, they are looking for classes that are *easy to get to*, be it on ground or online.

Dr. Amy Gaimaro, Dean of Innovative Delivery Methods at Molloy College

"Adult learners are seeking the fastest way to earn their degree," says Dr. Amy Gaimaro, Dean of Innovative Delivery Methods at Molloy College. "This is why we expanded our prior learning credit program allowing learners to gain college credit for learning accomplished outside of the traditional class-room. The benefits of a prior learning credit

program include shortened time to degree, lower tuition costs, and accelerated academic progress."

2. Can I afford it?

In the Champlain survey, 75% of respondents who said they were not going back to school explained their decision by saying they didn't want to be "burdened with student loan debt." Similarly, 70% said they're not returning to college because they "can't afford it."

In a paycheck-to-paycheck household, "Can I afford it?" is a fair question to ask, although higher ed's response would be "Can you afford not to?" Education Pays, a massive report from the College Board, devotes 35 of its 44 pages to the career and economic benefits of a college degree, noting that "[i]n 2015, median earnings of bachelor's degree recipients with no advanced degree who were working full time were $24,600 (67%) higher than those of high school graduates."

Before we can talk to students about grants, loans, and stipends, we must first reframe the cost discussion as an investment discussion. That's a significant theme that has to be woven throughout all of your institution's marketing messages. It also means talking about career outcomes—not just with numbers (there is no average student, after all), but with people. A prospective student wants to see people like her—who made the same leap she's considering—graduated and vaulted into fulfilling careers.

Some working adults may benefit from employer-paid tuition support. One way to help attract and serve adults is through employee partnerships that subsidize tuition or offer tuition reimbursement programs. Many corporate HR professionals will tell you that millions of dollars earmarked for employee education go unspent every year, in part because no one knows to ask for it.

However, many adults are self-funded and will need information on grants, scholarships, and the often obtuse financial aid process. Attempting to make college affordability more transparent, Congress in 2011 required institutions to post net price calculators that incorporate account grants, scholarships, and various aid packages to give prospective students an up-front picture of what their costs will be. However, many colleges bury these tools in their websites—alas, for good reason, as we'll explain.

Academic Year: 2015-16

Estimated tuition and fees	$47,750
+ Estimated room and board charges	$17,580
(Includes rooming accommodations and meals)	
+ Estimated cost of books and supplies	$1,070
+ Estimated other expenses	$5,114
(Personal expenses, transportation, etc.)	
Estimated total cost of attendance:	$71,514
– Estimated total grant aid:	$19,430
(Includes both merit and need based grant and scholarship aid from Federal, State, or Local Governments, or the Institution)	
Estimated Net Price After Grants and Scholarships:	**$52,084**

Grants and scholarships do not have to be repaid. Some students also qualify for student loans to assist in paying this net price; however, student loans do have to be repaid.

Net price calculators' accuracy can vary widely due to how individual colleges design them, how current their data is, and more. The difference between calculator estimates and actual costs for many families can be as little as $500 or as much as $5,000. That disparity may not matter much to traditional students, especially those with family backing and price insensitivity for their dream schools. But it can be a show-stopper for prospective adult students. In addition to making your net price calculator easy to find, make sure the data behind it is up to date and accurate, or you'll leave yourself open to accusations of bait-and-switch.

Lynne M. Lander Fleisher, Clarion University's director of online programs, also recommends that you make it clear to prospective students that, when they call your financial aid office, they specify whether they're interested in a non-traditional credential, such as accelerated, online, continuing education, etc.

"You need to tell the advisors that you're an online student so that the advisor will be on the same page as you," Fleisher says. "Advisors usually give the information for traditional students first, which online students aren't."

3. Does this institution have what I want?

In addition to listing the degrees, it's a good idea to list the curriculum that provides the career relevance of the courses. For example, after listing the courses, a paragraph or video from your faculty that speaks to how these courses can be beneficial in the workplace could speak volumes to students deciding on pathways and programs.

4. Will this degree be respected?

You don't have to be Ivy League to distinguish yourself as respected and accredited. Yes, the big-name schools have an advantage going in. But testimonials from graduates (like this one from Mount Aloysius College) and employers are very useful in conveying the credibility of your credential. When compet-

ing with well-known institutional brands, understand and play to your strengths. This is where publications and online resources from Colleges of Distinction and Abound can help students break through the vast marketing noise to find the right fit in an institution deeply committed to serving them.

5. Can I be successful?

Services are key here. Enrolling at an institution entails being steered toward several offices and departments, making sense of differing answers about how prior credits will transfer or apply to a major, and more. For someone already anxious about not having taken an Algebra class or written a research paper in over a decade, the typical enrollment labyrinth is hardly a salve.

Let them know help is available and emphasize personalized learning and support as well as extended hours for chat, email, or face-to-face support. Be sure to emphasize tech support along with your academic support. Let them know you'll be with them each step of the way from the application for admission to the application for graduation.

Matthew Bodenschatz, Director of Graduate and Continuing Education Admissions at Mount Aloysius College

"At Mount Aloysius College, our Admissions Office serves as the one-stop shop for prospective adult, online, and graduate students," says Matthew Bodenschatz, Mount Aloysius' director of graduate and continuing education admissions. "The office is open during standard weekday business hours, but

also into the evening upon request, an option made clear to all prospective students during the process."

Mount Aloysius' Admissions Office also arranges visits with academic department representatives, financial aid counselors, and billing specialists.

To ease the stress of this process on adults, many institutions are adopting a concierge model in which a single point of contact at the college helps adult students navigate the application, enrollment, and registration processes and overcome barriers to college success.

"Adult learners also do not have time to wait on the phone or stand in line for an answer to a specific question," says Randy Canivel, director of Midwestern State University's Flower Mound (Texas) campus. "For example, we have a Student Services Coordinator who is our student advocate and assists them with all facets of applying, enrolling, and paying for classes. Some schools have a team of people that register, enroll, and pay (via your funds) for your classes."

It's no coincidence that these factors overlap with Abound's Four A's rubric for recognizing top adult-serving institutions: *Accessibility, Affordability, Acceleration,* and *Advancement.*

Now that we know more about adult students and what they want, we'll discuss how you can be more competitive in attracting adult students to your institution. Stay tuned for our next installment of Ten Marketing Tips for Attracting Adult Learners.

Ten Marketing Tips for Attracting Adult Learners

In previous sections, we've discussed who adult learners are, why they're considering returning to college, and what questions they have about returning to college. Now let's turn our attention to what colleges can do to cut through the noise and bring prospective adult students closer to them.

1 - Your Website is your Front Door—Optimize it

More so than traditional students (who have more time for multiple campus visits), adult learners conduct most of their college searches online. So, your website is a more vital marketing asset with this learner segment. Of course, there's a breadcrumb trail of search and social that leads visitors to your site, and we'll get to that. But first thing's first: if you're leading visitors to an uncompelling destination, all those traffic-building efforts are wasted. That's not to suggest wholesale changes in order. But you can make less costly incremental changes, test visitor behavior, and iterate accordingly. Here are some areas to explore:

Make it Findable. Be certain your site is optimized for search engines. Search engine optimization is an ever-evolving marketing science, and it can take some digging through your site's analytics to understand what keywords or terms visitors were searching for to find your site, which of your pages attracted the most engagement, and more. If you don't have that expertise in house, there are affordable contract professionals who will help you opti-

mize your website, and it can be money well spent. [Here's some advice from Ruffalo Noel Levitz](#) for colleges looking to boost their presence in search.

Make it relatable. Images of leafy campuses, eager young faces playing violin, performing ballet, or mugging with the mascot may impress prospective traditional students and their parents. But they say very little to the adult learner about what her experience at your school would be like. Keenly aware that they're serving multiple audiences, several institutions have added subdomains to their websites where the user interface, images, and navigation are tailored to their adult audiences. [The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor,](#) [Champlain College,](#) and the [University of the Incarnate Word](#) are three such examples. Other schools, like [Elizabethtown College,](#) have created [distinct URLs](#) for their adult programs. With each of these approaches, there are [potential SEO benefits](#).

Make it Navigable. The typical college website is still a creature of the '90s—an online brochure that tries to be all things to all audiences and winds up being a loosely structured information dump. Think about what an adult learner would be searching for on your site—unique services, programs, costs, etc.—and give them a clear path to that information. Among the advantages of distinct site experiences for adult learners—such as through subdomains, subdirectories, or separate URLs—is that you can consolidate all of your adult-centered content in one

streamlined environment without forcing this time-constrained audience to wade past content geared toward your traditional learner audience.

 "Nichols College redesigned its website last year, and one of the key challenges was to create a site that catered to a myriad of prospective student types," says Cynthia Goodwin Brown, Nichols' Associate Vice President for Marketing and Communications. "We opted for a guided experience that allows visitors to identify themselves and their interests in two easy dropdowns. From there, each student receives a tailored website experience."

 "This was most important for non-traditional students, who are now directed to the information that is important and relevant to them—tuition, academic programs, and start dates for online, hybrid, and accelerated classes—without having to sift through information on residence halls or campus dining that might be important to traditional students," Brown says.

Make it Personalized—at Scale. Given their diversity of needs, adult learners may be the least monolithic segment higher ed marketers deal with. That's why so much of the discussion of concierge models in higher education seems to focus on non-traditional students. Unless you're capable of infusing Amazon levels of personalization in your website, consider using chatbots to help each of your visitors find what they're looking for. Put yourself in your customer's shoes: Would you rather wait on hold and then be stuck on the phone providing somewhat personal information about your lifestyle needs to someone you don't know, or sharing accurate and insightful information when you had time to think and weren't feeling pressured to answer right away? Chatbots can feed valuable insights back into your customer relationship management (CRM) systems, while scaling across your social media channels and dramatically reducing the staff time needed to respond to student inquiries.
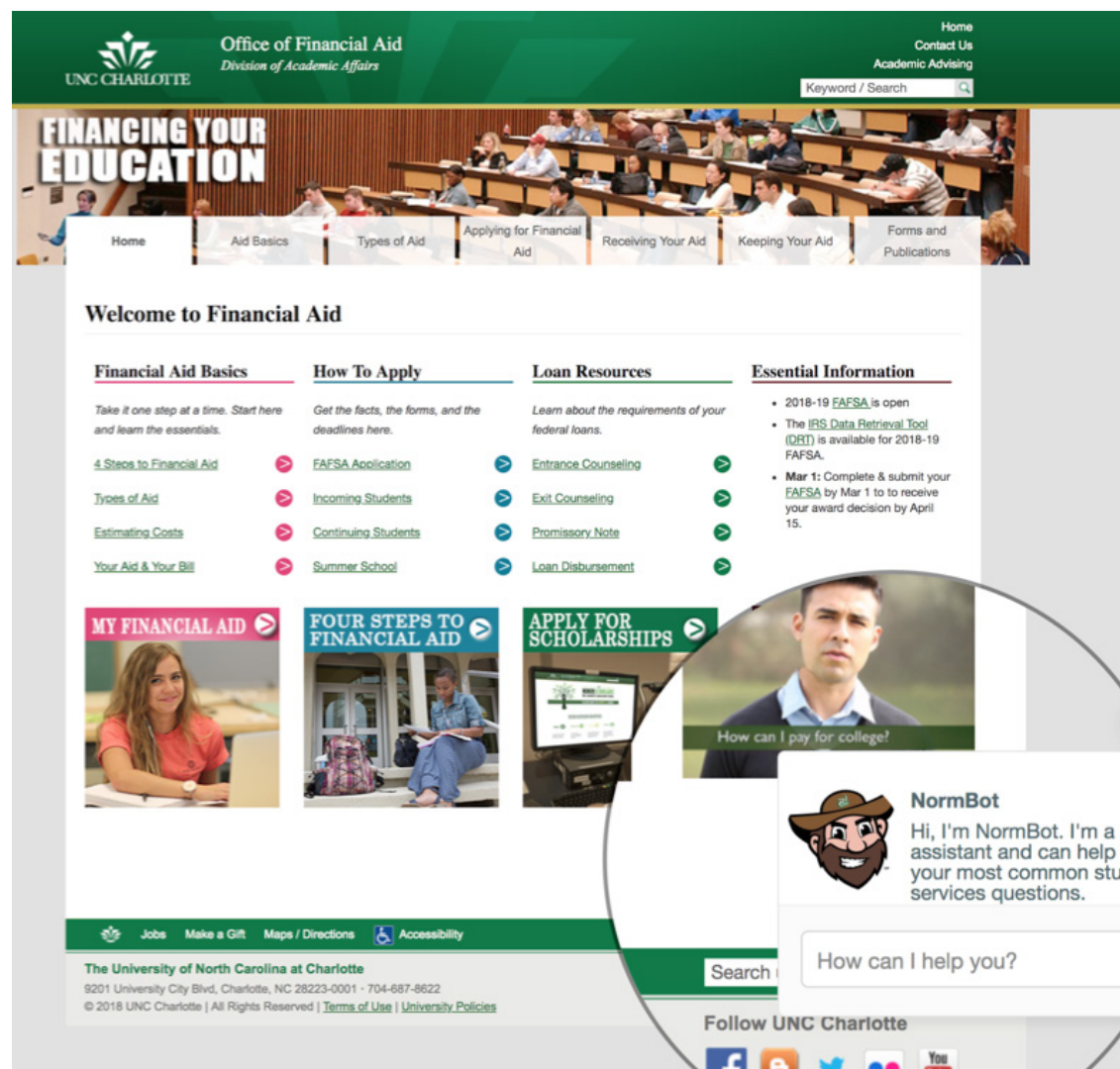
UNC-Charlotte's NormBot fields financial aid questions.

2 - Go Where Your Students Are—via Social Media and Geofencing

Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, and other social platforms each offer a different way to help complete a prospective student's picture of your school while providing you with unique ways to establish your brand voice and, effectively, maintain running focus groups. There are a [wealth](#) [of](#) [best](#) [practices](#) for each platform specific to higher education and a wide array of social listening and monitoring tools that consumer brands have used for years to gauge customer sentiment. Regardless of the strategies you adopt, or what content you choose to push through which channels, remember that social media is fundamentally a conversation, not a marketing megaphone. So keep in mind what it takes to be a good conversationalist—such as being interesting, curious, fun, authentic, and relevant.

Unless you're an elite school (and usually even if you are,) college recruitment is largely a regional, local, and even hyperlocal game, particularly with adult learners. Mainstream in digital marketing for several years, geofencing enables marketers to engage individuals with text messages, app notifications, or mobile digital ads as they enter, remain within, and leave a defined geographical area. College recruiters have been using the tactic at recruitment fairs, community college transfer days, local businesses, on-campus events, and more.
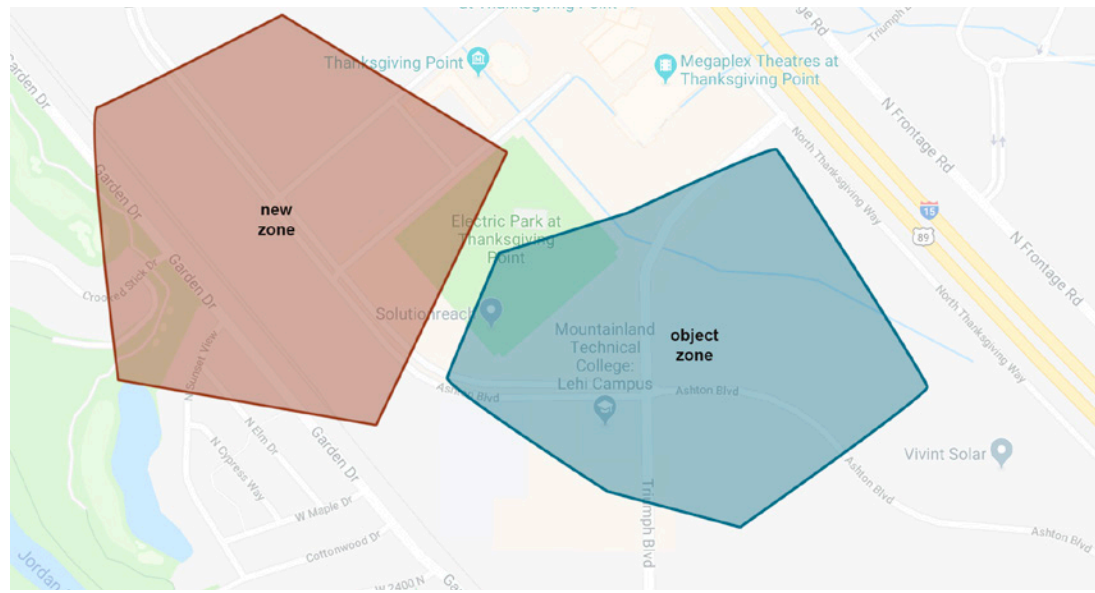
Randy Canivel, director of Midwestern State University's Flower Mound (Texas) campus, says geofencing has been effective in driving enrollment for his campus' nursing and respiratory care programs.

"Simply stated, you can pay a vendor to digitally 'fence' any facility or structure where potential students might convene," he says. "For example, we specifically target hospitals that we will be speaking or presenting to for 24 hours pre- and post-event. When a potential student pulls out their cell phone to search for a school, we come up on their search engine or on Facebook."

3 - Show the Career Benefit of the Curriculum

While everyone loves the notion of lifelong learning, most adults returning to college or universities are keenly focused on improving their career. As you describe your programs, also list the curriculum and articulate how these courses translate beneficially to the workplace. You may even want to list typical job titles related to the degree programs. In Texas, this isn't optional: the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 60x30TX

strategic plan, which sets a goal for 60% of Texans to have a postsecondary credential by 2030, "charges two- and four-year public institutions in Texas with documenting, updating, and communicating the skills students acquire in their programs" in its "Marketable Skills" section.

Mount Aloysius College's academic major pages, [like this one for Medical Imaging](), offer information on potential job descriptions, career locations, projected job openings, and median wages for the field. The information is compiled through the College's Institutional Advancement Office, providing data on where alumni are working as well as from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"With this information, prospective students are able to get what they are looking for without leaving the College's website," says Matthew Bodenschatz, Mount Aloysius' director of graduate and continuing education admissions.

4 - Make Financing Frictionless

While some employers will reimburse part or all of the tuition for related degree work, many working adults are self-funding or relying on loans. They are going to need to be quickly and clearly directed to financial aid resources from your website. Help them with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application, which is especially important with first-generation learners. Direct them to available grants and scholarships. Provide some rich resources on your website that can

independently coach them in how much aid is the right amount so they can borrow enough, but not too much. Most importantly, be sure your cost per credit hour is clear and apparent for each program. If you offer flat tuition or tuition discounts, consider giving that significant presence.

In our previous section, *"Five Questions Adult Learners Are Asking,"* we spotlighted the problems with net price calculators, but we'll reiterate how crucial it is to make sure the data behind them is up to date and accurate. It's also important to strike a balance here: the calculator has to gather enough information from the prospective student to produce a directionally accurate estimate of what types of aid, and how much, are available. Also, any visitor who's willing to provide this information is likely very far along the decision path and highly engaged, but don't abuse that engagement by forcing them through an overly long questionnaire.

A Note on Community Colleges: Pathways from community colleges to four-years can be [notorious obstacle courses](#)—both for students and for the administrators and faculty trying to clear those pathways. But if you're a four-year institution with good community college relationships and well-adhered-to articulation agreements, you're at a gigantic advantage with an adult learner segment that can be low-hanging fruit for student success. [Arizona State's](#) transfer students [resources page](#) includes a [transfer credit guide](#) that is designed to help prospective ASU transfers to understand their placement. and to minimize excess credits (which can jeopardize financial aid eligibility). [Midwestern State](#) in Texas provides [course equivalency](#) listings for over 50 area colleges.

5 - Tout Your Services and Support

In addition to financial aid to pay for tuition, adults entering college today often face other daunting financial challenges. NPR recently [shared survey](#)

results showing that the rates of homelessness and hunger among college students is greater than previously thought. The survey sample, which includes more than 33,000 students at 70 community colleges in 24 states, led researchers to "estimate that 63 percent that 63 percent of parenting students were food insecure and almost 14 percent were homeless, but only about five percent received any child care assistance." Food banks for students, child care facilities that offer free or discounted care, and discounts on transit all matter for adult students trying to gain education to improve their lives. Support extends well beyond the classroom when dealing with adult learners.

6 - Deliver Flexible, Portable, & Accelerated Learning Options

This is one of the most critical offerings in adult education and one that many websites don't play up to potential. Let them know you offer many ways to learn and earn a credential. Make it easy to see which programs are offered fully online and which are hybrid or on ground.

Southern Utah University provides a prime example of this easy-to-read format. Launched in March 2018, SUU's programs page lists the delivery method of all of the university's programs.

"This newly launched page represents at least a year of work, says Ellen Treanor, SUU's executive director of brand strategy, "but it makes finding a program much easier for adult learners."

Ellen Treanor, Executive Director of Brand Strategy at Southern Utah University

In part two of this series we'll talk more about accelerated formats, transfer credits, advanced

placement, and prior learning assessments. Any options you can offer adults to use their existing knowledge and expertise to speed their time to completion, such as through prior learning assessments, should be dominant on your webpages. Again, remember they are not looking for easy classes; they are looking for classes that are easy to access and the opportunity to finish as quickly as possible.

As an aside, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning offers a [wealth of workshops,](#) trainings, tools, and services can help to structure and support PLA at your institution.

"At Midwestern State University we offer a general studies program (Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences) that allows for a student who has the vocational, technical, or military work experience to have this translated into credit hours," Midwestern State's Canivel says.

Canivel says Midwestern State uses the [American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service](#) to validate whether these experiences can be translated into college credits.

7 - Train Empathetic Support Staff to Respond in a Timely Manner

Administration and faculty profiles, open letters, and meetups can be powerful ways to convey that your institution is powered by human beings committed to reaching and teaching adults. Are there friendly faces they can reach out to with questions? Have staff been trained in how to assist adults? We'll take a deeper dive into veterans affairs in part two, but for this group especially, ramp up some support staff to be experts so they can

assist with the myriad questions each returning vet will have. We covered this earlier, but it bears emphasizing that empathy starts with the images you use on your site as well as your social media. Do you have a special section for adults or have you mixed photos of adult learners into your images? If all the prospective student sees are images of 18- to 21-year-olds in groups (like so much of the purchased online clip art portrays) they may not relate to you and move on.

8 - Bust Through Bureaucracy

Take a keen look at the tone and language on your site and ask whose language you're speaking—yours or theirs? Higher ed's lexicon is filled with acronyms and jargon that hold little meaning to incoming students and can even alienate them. A student who is the first in their family to earn a college degree may not understand terms like 'matriculation' or processes that involve Registrars or financial aid. Mentors and coaches who help students as early as application can help get and keep busy adults on track. A time-line on your site that shows each step of the application through enrollment process and where your enrollee is in that process can be a powerful confi-dence-building tool as well.

9 - Share Student Success Stories

Who doesn't read a review before deciding to spend money these days? Highlight your student successes through your student voice. These can be profiles on your site, quick videos or simple photos with quote-out testimonials. For adults reluctant to make the leap, seeing others who did and were successful is motivational. Western Governors University

provides several examples [like this one](#) of how emotional videos and stories of overcoming hardship on the way to success are powerful marketing tools that encourage other adults to build early mindsets of grit and tenacity. Speaking of tenacity, growth mindset company [GetSet's](#) technology platform connects students with classmates who have overcome similar obstacles.

Mount Aloysius College recently began an alumni profile series that is consistent—from the walls of its academic buildings to prospective student emails to its [website academic major pages](#). Profiles are short but packed with information on recent grad-uates who have made quick transitions from Mount Aloy-sius student to professional. Students' profiles include those who completed undergraduate or graduate programs and those who entered college directly from high school, those begin-ning college after years away from high school, and those who are returning for a second or even third degree.

10 - Compete with Big Brands by Playing to Your Strengths

Sure, the football schools and the Ivies have immediate name recogni-tion, but that doesn't mean you can't compete. Don't play Goliath's game if you're David. Talk about your caring faculty in smaller classrooms. Talk about personalized learning or portfolio assistance. Got an [innovative corporate partnership to support the curriculum of a degree program in a hot area like data analytics](#) or [cybersecurity](#)? Don't just leave it in your site's news section where it can get buried under inclement weather updates and

new trustee appointments. Share any work you're doing to build learning communities so students don't feel lost in a large sea of students. Are 100% of your computer science grads employed at great jobs in one year? Talk about it and show their stories. Point out how cost-saving it is to go with a smaller or lesser-known school. Always talk about your accreditation. For example, [Arizona State University's ASU Online](#) program lets adults know they are getting access to the same expert faculty online that they would get on ground while benefiting from the flexible format. No wonder the average age of students there is 29 years old.

Bonus - Customize and Personalize your Messaging

This takes us to the longer play of not only reaching, but also successfully recruiting, adult learners. They aren't just a name and ID in a student information system. Think CRM—customer relationship management. What are you doing to continue to interest them as they shop around? Are you reaching out to check their progress with financial aid? Just as you looked at the tone and messaging on your website, give the same scrutiny to your email or text (or phone) outreach to be sure you are as personal, friendly, and supportive as possible. Also, work to reduce response time to 24 hours whenever possible.

They are likely shopping several institutions, and timely responses can be the difference in who they select once they find several good fits.

Next Up: Enrollment Practices that Support Adult Learners

We hope you've found some helpful tips here to tune your marketing to resonate with the adult learner market. In part two of this series, we'll look at important hurdles to clear in the enrollment process, including bridging the digital readiness gap, the importance of transfer credit and prior learning assessments, and the leading role academic support services play in helping adult learners enroll and succeed.

Acknowledgments:

Abound is a mission-driven membership organization. We share a commitment with our member institutions to excellence in adult education via the Four As: Affordability, Accessibility, Acceleration, and Advancement. Abound continually looks to its members as sources of inspiration for our mission and for evidence of efficacy in practice.

In preparing this report, we are grateful for the rich contributions from several members, including:

- Melissa Marcello, Executive Director, Division of Continuing Professional Studies, Champlain College

- Elaine Green, Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, Chestnut Hill College.

- Amy Gaimaro, Dean of Innovative Delivery Methods, Molloy College.

- Joseph Havis, Vice President of Enrollment Management, Fontbonne University

- Lynne M. Lander Fleisher, Director of Online Programs, Clarion University

- Matthew Bodenschatz, Director of Graduate and Continuing Education Admissions, Mount Aloysius

- Randy Canivel, Director of Flower Mound Campus, Midwestern State University - Texas

- Debra Sheesley, Director of Institutional Research, Elizabethtown College

- Cynthia Goodwin Brown, Associate Vice President for Marketing and Communications, Nichols College

- Ellen Treanor, Executive Director of Brand Strategy, Southern Utah University