

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Differentiating Commitment to Welfare: Adult Student Perceptions of Institutional Practices

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Adult learners are enrolling in U.S. higher education at a growing pace. These students have obligations and needs that influence their preferences for programs of study, scheduling, and specific support systems. This article recommends a number of research-based institutional practices relevant to the welfare of adult student learners.

Adult college students have long been considered “non-traditional” in comparison to recent high school graduates who enroll directly into a four-year residential college experience. However, there has been a marked shift such that adult college students are an increasing portion of the U.S. undergraduate population. State governments and national organizations have recommended a specific focus on recruiting and retaining adult students to achieve goals of increased postsecondary attainment. The literature points to several ways in which adult students differ substantially from students who are recent high school graduates. Adult students are more likely to be managing work and family responsibilities in addition to their college coursework. Their many obligations influence their preferences regarding programs of study, course scheduling, faculty engagement, and other aspects of the college experience. Without a thorough understanding of adult student needs and expectations, colleges and universities are unlikely to tailor their offerings, policies, or procedures to better attract and support adult students.

The research team conducted a mixed methods study, commissioned by the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA), examining the college selection and enrollment choices of adult students (individuals age 25 years and older) at private, four-year, nonprofit institutions. This article focuses on best practices and adult student enrollment choices among Tennessee private nonprofit institutions. The findings include promising institutional practices specific to adult students, with a keen focus on adult student welfare. While the findings and suggested best practices are specific to Tennessee private, nonprofit institutions, other institutions interested in serving adult students across the country may draw on these best practices in ways that best suit their geographic contexts, program offerings, and campus cultures.

Literature Review

According to the U.S. Department of Education, adult students—those age 25 years and older—accounted for nearly 8.2 million students enrolled in college, or about

40 percent of all students enrolled in college, in 2014 (Snyder, de Bray, and Dillow 2016, 466). In Tennessee, 900,000 adults (approximately 18 percent) older than 25 years already have some college education but no degree, and 1.4 million (approximately 27 percent) have only a high school diploma or equivalent (Census 2010; Tennessee Higher Education Commission 2015). The college enrollment decisions of an ever-increasing number of prospective adult students are largely influenced by specific institutional characteristics and perceived benefits of enrollment.

Recent research findings by Hutchens (2016) show that the availability of a specific major and program cost are the two institutional characteristics most important to adult students (Hutchens 2016, 42). Hutchens' findings (2016) also indicate that for highly nontraditional students (those with more than four nontraditional characteristics, such as working full time or having dependent children [Choy 2002]), the availability of a specific major replaces cost as their primary concern in their choice of an institution of higher education at which to enroll.

A 1987 study of nontraditional student choice reveals that a significant personal or professional event can be the catalyst for an adult's choice to return to school (Bers and Smith 1987). Review of the more recent literature supports earlier findings and concludes, regarding predisposition for college, that adults tend to fall into two categories: *professional predisposition* and "*right-time*" *predisposition* (Hutchens 2016; Hutchens and Franklin 2013). Findings from Hutchens' 2016 doctoral research indicate that adult students' reasons for enrolling in college included "personal growth, professional reasons, and a sense it was the 'right time'" (53).

For high-demand fields that provide a sustainable income for a family, postsecondary education is crucial; it can also be a welcome challenge and skill-building opportunity (Tolbert 2012). While the idea of return on investment (ROI) is important in the college choice process, adult learners who do not have access either to this information or to high-quality postsecondary options within a reasonable distance will still experience obstacles when deciding to enroll in higher education

(Blagg and Chingos 2016). According to findings from a Public Agenda survey (2013), prospective adult college students are interested in an academic experience that is connected to their work experience and professional goals and that provides some additional or new job experience (Hagelskamp *et al.* 2013).

Adult students use the Internet and word of mouth as primary sources of information in the college search and selection process (Hagelskamp *et al.* 2013; Hutchens 2016). While less critical for adult students, especially compared to their traditional-aged counterparts, campus visits do provide useful information about an institution or program where they might enroll. Adult learners are likely to visit and call programs and institutions to obtain information for use in their postsecondary choice process (Hutchens 2016).

The adult college search process is brief. A recent study found that 65 percent of nontraditional students choose to enroll within six months of beginning their college search process (Hutchens 2016). Adult students are also likely to select a school and decide to enroll in one step rather than decide to attend college, identify possible schools, and then select a school (the typical process for traditional-aged college students) (Hutchens 2016). These findings suggest that recruiters and advisors should communicate with prospective adult students in an efficient manner. Meeting students in the way that best serves their needs demonstrates a level of caring that is essential to student success.

Institutional Commitment to Student Welfare

In their book *Rethinking College Student Retention*, Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, and McLendon (2014) recommend a series of practices that are essential to the success of commuter college students (*i.e.*, students attending non-residential campuses). Their recommendations include an array of actions that together highlight the importance of institutional commitment to student welfare and institutional integrity. The authors contend that commitment to student welfare and institutional integrity reflects the culture of the school. Specifically, "respect for each student as an individual

should manifest itself in the day-to-day interactions college and university administrators, staff members, and clerical workers have with students” (39). This agrees with Perna’s (2010) work: Faculty and administrators serving adult and working students must understand the population and adapt to its needs.

Institutional policy, procedure, and programming communicate the level of commitment to student welfare and academic growth and development (Braxton *et al.* 2014). How and when institutions offer academic programs, services, and support resources directly affect the accessibility of college by adult students and their ability to complete a postsecondary degree. Not providing classes and university services at convenient times for adult students is a significant barrier to adult students’ enrollment.

Most colleges and universities are not designed with the adult student in mind. This is especially apparent when considering the admission and financial aid experiences of adult students at institutions that have traditionally served the eighteen- to 22-year-old college-going population. Adult students often have complex family and financial situations, and these complexities typically require strategies and solutions beyond the knowledge of the traditional financial aid counselor (Hutchens 2016). Further, because financial aid policy dictated by institutions, states, and even the federal government is designed for traditional students and typically does not accommodate individual adjustments or case-by-case considerations, it offers little flexibility to adult students with more dynamic life circumstances (Hart 2003).

Institutions communicate their commitment to student welfare by intentionally structuring services and schedules to accommodate nontraditional student schedules. Straightforward processes for student experiences in registration, featuring campus technology and services and clear communication, also demonstrate concern for student welfare and increase student commitment to the institution (Braxton *et al.* 2014). It is critical to communicate student-centered processes and practices to adult students during the recruitment process so they can see how the institution values their welfare and experience.

Conceptual Framework

Building on a review of the literature and critical engagement with the Braxton *et al.* (2014) paradigm of retention and student success, a conceptual framework was developed to better understand the adult college choice process (see Figure 1). This framework informed the study design and associated research methods.

Study Design and Institution-Selection Process

The authors employed a purposive sampling strategy to tease out specific information and expertise from volunteer adult students, campus staff, and administrators at TICUA member institutions. The authors partnered with TICUA to identify and invite institutions to participate in the project and ultimately contacted 18 TICUA member institutions to invite their participation in the inquiry about the adult student college choice process and adult college student success. Ten TICUA member institutions chose to participate, including four in the student survey, three in interviews of adult students and TICUA institution staff members, and three in the survey and interviews; an additional three TICUA member institutions participated in interviews of adult students and TICUA institution staff members.

Methods

The study used a mixed methods approach to identify specific institutional practices that influence adult students’ decisions to enroll in higher education and to select a specific institution. The practices investigated were informed by the literature on adult students and institutional commitment to student welfare. This approach was chosen to allow research of broad trends related to adult student choices and behavior through survey data and interviews regarding how adults experience higher education at traditional four-year, liberal arts institutions.

During the fall 2016 semester, the authors surveyed adult students at seven nonprofit, private institutions in Tennessee.¹ In total, 2,879 adult students enrolled at the

¹ *The authors sought and secured permission to use a survey instrument developed by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. In its November 2013 report, “Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults without

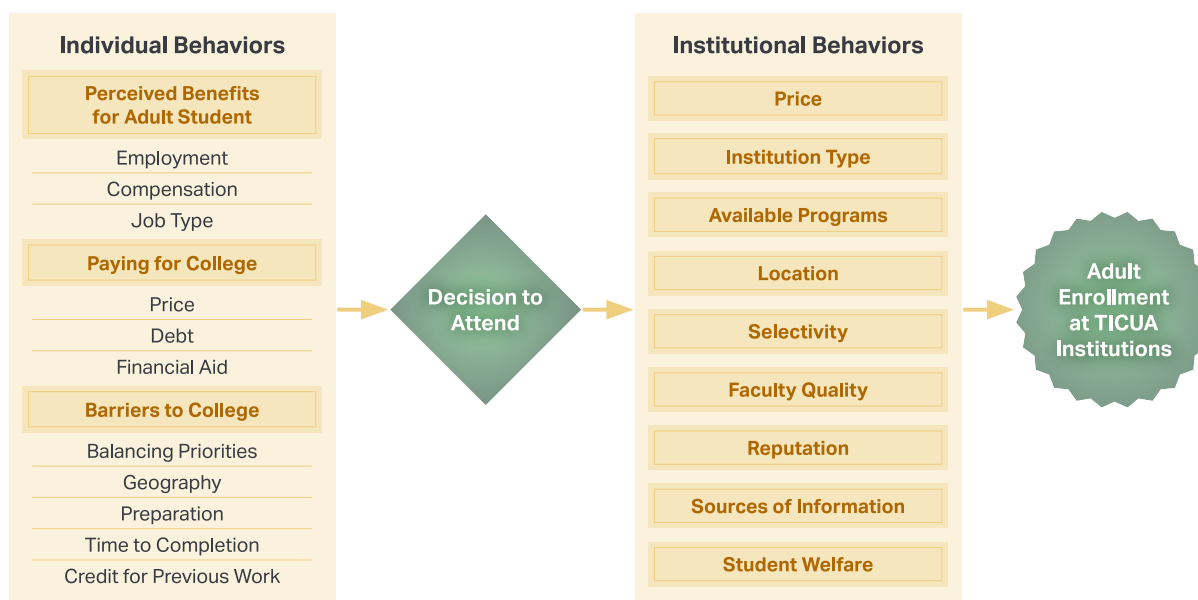


FIGURE 1 ► Factors and Behaviors in Adult Students' Higher Education Enrollment

seven TICUA member institutions were invited to participate in the survey. The target population was adult students seeking their first degree at a TICUA institution. Distribution of the survey was managed at each institution by campus staff and may have included all adult students. The survey asked participants their age and the type of degree they were pursuing. However, the survey instrument did not specifically ask whether the degree was their first. In total, 402 students participated in the survey; 263 students completed the survey. Respondents eliminated from analysis did not finish the survey, were younger than 25 years of age, or were pursuing a graduate degree.

In addition to the survey, during the spring 2017 semester, the authors interviewed adult students and college and university administrators who work with adult students at nine nonprofit, private institutions in Ten-

nessee. Campus administrators distributed information regarding the project, including a request for volunteer interview participants. Potential participants were instructed to contact a member of the project team to set a schedule and location for their interview. In total, the authors spoke with 22 participants: ten current adult college students from three of the participating institutions and twelve campus administrators from nine of the participating institutions.

The authors analyzed the survey and interview data in order to better understand how private, nonprofit institutions in Tennessee can attract prospective adult students and demonstrate institutional commitment to their unique circumstances. The findings and recommendations that follow derive from this analysis.

Findings

Institutional Characteristics and Perceived Benefits

The survey included questions that addressed institutional characteristics and perceived benefits associated with college enrollment. The first asked students the

Degrees Think about Going (Back) to School," Public Agenda researched elements associated with the prospective adult college student choice process, such as preparation and expectations. The authors adapted this survey to study adult students currently enrolled at colleges and universities in Tennessee. In addition to modifying the survey language, many questions were eliminated and some were added based on the literature on adult students cited above.

main reason they chose their institution over other schools. The frequencies of students' answers are presented in Table 1.

"Exactly the program you wanted" was the most frequently selected answer, followed closely by "convenience/location" and "other." Cost was highlighted by only 14.8 percent of respondents. These findings confirm the importance to adult students of finding a program that suits their professional and personal needs.

Table 2 presents the "other" answers according to identified themes regarding institution selection. The two most frequent themes were the religious affiliation and the affordability of the institution.

Another group of questions addressed the career field sought by survey respondents. Two questions asked students to describe their areas of study or career field sought and whether the field of study was a passion or was chosen for the job prospects it offered. The text boxes of the first question were reviewed and coded for similar answers.

Nearly 40 percent (39.7 percent) of survey respondents reported "passion" while 19.2 percent selected "likely to improve job projects." Of those students who chose "neither," six indicated a personal or faith-based mission, four indicated the importance of time to degree completion, and three indicated a career-related reason such as time already invested in the field or a desire to pursue a specific career path.

The literature highlights the role of cost and debt associated with college choice. Survey respondents were asked about their level of concern about debt (see Table 5) as well as about the main reason they were pursuing a degree (see Table 6).

Respondents who indicated "other" were provided with a text field in which to record their reason for pursuing a degree. Table 7 groups "other" answers by theme (some answers addressed more than one theme and were counted independently in each category).

An initial theme that emerged from the interviews was how perceptions of higher education's value were shaped by two factors: price and fit. The price factor was understood to mean the cost of tuition; neither interview group mentioned the cost of books, commuting, or

TABLE 1 ► Primary Reason for Choice of Institution

Reason	n	%
Valid		
Convenience/Location	36	14.8
Affordability	28	11.5
Exactly the program you wanted	49	20.1
Admission requirements easier to meet/ that is where I got accepted	6	2.5
Best school for this field/degree	28	11.5
This school gave me the most credit for previous work or experience	22	9.0
Someone recommended it	29	11.9
Other	46	18.9
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Missing		
System	19	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

TABLE 2 ► Secondary Reason for Choice of Institution

Mentions	n
Religious Affiliation of Institution	13
Affordability	13
Reputation or Recommendation	11
Convenience	10

TABLE 3 ► Field of Professional Interest

	n	%
Valid		
Healthcare	28	11.9
Religion	84	35.7
Business	87	37.0
Teaching	8	3.4
Legal	8	3.4
Computing	5	2.1
Other	15	6.4
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>235</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Missing		
System	28	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

TABLE 4 ► Reason for Choice of Academic Program

	n	%
Valid		
Passion	95	39.7
Likely to improve job prospects	46	19.2
Both	84	35.1
Neither (specify) what is the reason you are pursuing this specific field?	14	5.9
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	239	100.0
Missing		
System	24	
<i>Total</i>	263	

TABLE 5 ► Concern About Debt

	n	%
Valid		
A lot	93	40.6
Some	53	23.1
Only a little	38	16.6
Not at all	45	19.7
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	229	100.0
Missing		
System	34	
<i>Total</i>	263	

TABLE 6 ► Primary Reason for Pursuing a Degree

	n	%
Valid		
To get ahead in your current job or career	106	43.6
To get a different kind of job or career altogether (please describe)	78	32.1
To get a good education and learn about the world	26	10.7
Other	26	10.7
None of these	7	2.9
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	243	100.0
Missing		
System	20	
<i>Total</i>	263	

fees associated with college attendance. “Fit” was understood to mean “matching” between the adult student’s needs and goals and various aspects of the institution, including degree programs.

Several adult students reported that they perceived tuition costs to be high. Harriet referred to the cost as “pricey,” and several other students described it as “expensive.” Adult students’ perceptions contrasted with those of TICUA member campus staff, who described tuition as “lower price” and “competitive.”

Several adult students referred to major of interest as a key component in their college choice. Harriet shared that she

could’ve gone back to [her previous institution] to start back where [she] left off with elementary education, but [she] wanted something different, something new, a new start. [She] decided to check out [her current institution]; they ended up accepting some credits, but it did [not] play a big role. [She] wanted to get into entrepreneurship ... and learn more about managing employees.

Adult students also shared that supportive staff working in enrollment played a role in the “matching” process. Charlie said he was “walk[ed] through the whole process” of enrollment. Kate, a TICUA campus administrator, shared that “congruence between expectation and reality” was a critical component of adult student and institution matching. Kyle, another administrator, explained that “adult student[s] pick [an institution] because they tried other places and it did [not] feel like a good fit.”

Adult students spoke particularly about the interaction between price and fit and these factors’ influence on their perception of the value of education at their institution. Notably, the same adult students who perceived the cost of tuition as high expressed high levels of satisfaction with their institutions. Isaac described attending his college as a “life-enhancing experience.” Other adult students expressed similar satisfaction with their choice despite their perceptions of high price. TICUA member institutions’ staff and administrators observed, as the adult students did, that fit often trumps price. Kate shared that she believed that students chose

her institution because “they know [the institution’s] history,” they “believe in the brand,” and the institution “made them feel welcome.”

Interview participants indicated that personal and professional reasons influenced their enrollment. Several reported returning to school for “career development” and the availability of “future positions...with [a] degree.” Theresa shared that she was “looking for full-time work with benefits instead of multiple part-time jobs.” Adult students also reported that they returned to school for “access to a promotion” and “advancement considerations.” Another motivator was applicable skills for industry. Vivian, a staff member, shared that adult students were focused on developing “organizational skills that are practical for the workplace.” Several adult students agreed that gaining “industry-relevant skills” was a motivator.

Both interview groups also described personal reasons for adult students to enroll in college. Liz, a TICUA campus administrator, shared that “[adult students] are internally motivated to change their situation.” Several adult students described their interest in being a “role model” for their children and in avoiding “be[ing] an embarrassment.” Isaac was interested in being “an inspiration” for his children and his employees. Noelle, a staff member, described adult students as “motivating [their] kids” and “be[ing] the example.” Another motivator is earning a degree. Maureen, a staff member, shared that “students [felt] disappointed in not completing [their] degree” previously. Francina, an adult student, shared that she wanted to “finish what [she] had started.”

Sources of Information

Survey respondents also described how they had learned about colleges and programs (see Table 8). Adult students most frequently reported gathering information from individual college websites ($n=163$) and from family, friends, or colleagues ($n=157$); more than 70 percent reported gathering information from both sources.

Institutional Commitment to Student Welfare

The survey included questions about adult students’ experiences on campus and their preferences regarding

TABLE 7 ➤ “Other” Reasons for Pursuing a Degree (by Theme)

Mentions	n
Career goals	15
Degree a life goal	11
Religious calling to school	10

TABLE 8 ➤ Sources of Information About Higher Education Institutions

Source of Information	Total Responses (n)	Answered “Yes” (%)
Individual college websites	163	74.4
Friends, family or colleagues	157	71.4
Interactive websites to rank and compare priorities	95	44.6
College recruiters who promote, and market their school	80	36.9
Books with information on colleges and programs	63	29.7
Television commercials, billboards, or other ads	56	26.5
Guidance counselors at individual colleges	51	24.1
Financial aid advisors	50	23.3
An employer	43	20.4
High school guidance counselors	22	10.5

the award of credit for previous coursework or work experience (see Table 9). Large percentages of students received credit for previous coursework or work experience or were able to take a test to demonstrate previously learned skills. Only 13.5 percent report not receiving any credit for previous work.

Table 10 presents the data concerning the importance of the award of credit to adult students’ decision to enroll. The majority of students (68.4%, $n=143$) stated that receiving credit was a significant factor in their decision to enroll.

The survey also invited feedback regarding adult students’ time to degree completion. One question asked students to indicate their preference for a well-structured program that supports timely graduation;

TABLE 9 ► Transfer and Award of Credit

	n	%
Valid		
Transferred course credit	179	73.1
Received credit for previous work experience	17	6.9
Took a test to receive course credit	4	1.6
Other (please explain)	12	4.9
No—I did not receive course credit beyond normal course completion	33	13.5
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>245</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Missing		
System	18	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

another invited students to indicate their preference for exploring the curriculum, having both a well-structured program supporting timely graduation and curricular exploration, or neither. Students' clear preference for a structured program and on-time graduation is evident in the 60.3 percent ($n=141$) of valid responses for that choice (see Table 11).

Another theme that emerged from the interviews related to the nature and quality of interactions among TICUA member institutions, various institutional representatives, and adult students. Interview participants agreed that adult students have different needs from those of traditional-aged students. Christine, a TICUA member campus administrator, shared her belief that adult students may express their needs as "If I [am] giving my best, will you help me?" Laura, another TICUA member campus administrator, described adult students as "driven but not sure how to do it." TICUA member campus staff, administrators, and adult students shared

some of the ways in which institutions are working to meet adult students' needs.

Adult students reported satisfaction with enrollment and registration processes, noting that they were "speedy" and "quick." Several shared that they completed their application process in one day; another shared that he completed the process in one week. Francina shared that one time she "almost dropped out, but...faculty followed up with her" and convinced her to persist. She also mentioned that staff members helped her register for the term when she considered leaving school and noted that she had experienced issues with registration the previous year that may delay her graduation.

Most of the adult students interviewed noted the importance of efficiency in the award of transfer credit. Karen pointed out that the "ability to get [transfer] credits ... made the choice easy." Vivian "appreciated the credit for prior work experience and skills." Barb shared that her "past associate degree credits all transferred" to her bachelor's degree. Harriet, who had received through transfer nearly half the credits required for her bachelor's degree, was also pursuing exams for further streamlining and cost savings related to degree completion. Tom was able to transfer credit for most lower-division classes, and that "saved at least a year" of courses.

Not all adult students reported having had a positive experience relative to transfer credit. Theresa shared that while her institution does offer transfer credit for relevant work, she found the process "burdensome, and [it] only award[ed] a couple [of] credits." Several TICUA member campus staff agreed that transfer was sometimes "challenging" due to "unique degree programs offered" at their institutions.

TABLE 10 ► Importance of Award of Credit in Decision to Enroll

	Yes, it was important		No, it was not important		I'm glad I received it, but it wasn't important	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Transferred course credit	115	65.7	17	9.7	43	25.6
Received credit for previous work experience	4	82.4	3	17.6	0	0
Took a test to receive course credit	3	75.0	1	25.0	0	0
Other	10	83.3	2	16.7	0	0

TABLE 11 ► Importance of Time to Degree Versus Academic Exploration

	n	%
Valid		
A clearly structured program that lays out the exact courses and exams you need to take to graduate on time	141	60.3
Being able to explore different classes and areas of interest before deciding what to focus on	17	7.3
Both	71	30.3
Neither	5	2.1
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>234</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Missing		
System	29	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

Adult students also shared their reasons for taking technology-facilitated classes. Some preferred face-to-face learning and shared that they “took everything on campus.” Harriet indicated that she “hadn’t tried [online classes] and was not planning [to].” Isaac offered his perspective: “Online classes for older adults are about scheduling more than anything. It is [not] a matter of preference, it is a matter of necessity.”

Recommendations for Practice

Institutions can only minimally influence adult students’ behaviors and practices. They can cultivate prospective adult student interest, but ultimately, they cannot change the intrinsic motivations and values of adult students pursuing higher education. For these reasons, recommendations specifically identify practices institutions can adopt to promote a sense of welfare among adult students. Findings from the current research, supported by the literature, include the following:

- Given the brief college search timeline for and particular interests of adult college students, institutions should streamline communications for adult students and provide information specific to adult students on their websites. This would communicate that the institution has adult students clearly in mind in its practices and would provide easily

accessible information most germane to the adult student college search.

- Institutions can also work to ensure that faculty and staff are delivering consistent and timely professional and responsive services when adult students are on campus. This includes developing training for staff and faculty to build understanding of common issues and concerns, eliminate administrative hurdles, and automate, as much as possible, required action steps related to enrollment and registration of adult students. Further, adult students often need faculty to offer some flexibility—*e.g.*, reasonable deadline extensions or assignments that focus on adult perspectives or work experience—as well as to provide classroom experiences in which personal and professional experience clearly demonstrate the applicability of learning objectives.
- Institutions should also provide academic programs that incorporate high-demand skills that can be acquired quickly. When adult students are provided with the academic programs most interesting to them and those programs are delivered in a high-quality environment, price is less of a critical factor in the enrollment decision-making process.
- Adult students are also interested in institutional mission: programs that marry skill and content with understanding of vocation and purpose are attractive.
- Finally, credit for previous work and multi-modal learning options (online and classroom options, accelerated, subscription based) are largely necessary for adult learners to enroll in higher education.

Limitations

The purpose of the study was not to generalize but rather to gain deeper insight into what supports adult college student success and degree completion at private, not-for-profit institutions in the state of Tennessee. As a case study, the project focused narrowly on issues specific to best serving adult college students in Tennessee. As a result, it may not be useful in informing broader student populations’ college choice process or higher education policy in states where circumstances

differ. The survey response rate and the total number of student interviews were low. Such circumstances can present challenges when drawing inferences for the entire adult student population.

Conclusion

Adult college students are drawn to high-demand, career-focused programs that recognize and reward their skills and experiences. When adults arrive on campus, they expect professional and efficient administrative services that can support their completion of a degree.

Adult students' primary concerns pertain to balancing the demands of school, work, and family. Clear timelines and manageable costs can help adult students progress toward their degrees of choice. Adult students also appreciate the one-on-one support of high-quality faculty and caring support staff. The authors recommend that campuses interested in demonstrating their commitment to adult student welfare focus on these recommendations for practice and consider ways to build institutional capacity in these areas.

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