

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

How do Adult Learners Fit into Strategic Enrollment Management Plans? Attitude and Perception of Enrollment Managers

By Richard Gonzalez

This single case study of qualitative design examined how enrollment management (EM) leaders' views and perceptions about adult learners influence the student-profile prioritization and the development of strategic enrollment management goals and how this process is intersected and or influenced by the undergraduate college experience and leadership styles of EM leaders.

In early August, colleges prepare for the influx of first-year students while high school seniors gear up for their last year. It's a time of celebrating summer memories and nearing high school graduation. Despite National College Decision Day being months away, states get ready to celebrate College Application Month in October, a movement endorsed by the Obama White House (The White House 2016). The college application movement aims to assist high school seniors in navigating college applications and ensuring they apply to at least one postsecondary institution (ACT 2019, 1). This includes providing support from college recruiters, school advisors, and volunteers during school hours and with access to a computer.

However, for many high school graduates without a college degree or job-skills certificate, the path to higher education lacks excitement, resources, and support (Blumenstyk 2018; Campbell and Finch 2016; Gonzalez, Martinez, and Miller 2019). This forgotten

population of adult learners includes individuals like a fast-food manager aspiring to become a social worker, a single parent with limited emotional and financial support, and an unemployed war veteran without the validation of a college degree (Hansman and Sissel 2001; Knowles 1990; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2015; Quinnan 1997). These examples reflect the diverse experiences of adult learners who didn't immediately pursue college education after high school or didn't complete their college degree.

This research study draws attention to systemic neglect toward adult learner undergraduate students and prospective students—particularly in terms of enrollment management practices and recruitment outreach (Blumenstyk 2018; Campbell and Finch 2016; Gonzalez, Martinez, and Miller 2019). More importantly, it seeks to spotlight the thousands of adult learner prospective students who are left behind with only a high school diploma. It is a call to action that seeks to emphasize a

sense of urgency to prioritize undergraduate adult learners in strategic enrollment management (SEM) plans, defined as tangible plans that guide decision-making and strategy development across departments and serve as a compass for five to ten years (Hossler 2000; Hossler 2004; Hossler, Beam, and Associates 1990; Hossler, Bontrager, and Associates 2015).

This study offered an opportunity to examine SEM practices at a public, non-profit, four-year higher education institution with selective admissions. Because of the long history of community colleges predominately serving adult learner students (Levin 2007; Quinnan 1997), this study concentrated on universities that offer four-year degrees, have on-campus housing, and selective admissions. It reviewed the relationship between the often-conflicting priorities that influence a SEM plan and undergraduate adult learner recruitment practices.

Statement of the Problem

When SEM plans center around traditional high school graduating classes, non-profit public higher education institutions do not recruit, admit, and enroll (*i.e.*, SEM practices) adult learners with the same energy and resources as they do traditional high school students. The proportion of student recruiters, marketing and outreach efforts, enthusiasm, and one-on-one guidance to navigate the college admissions process is not equitably distributed to include undergraduate adult learner prospective students (Campbell and Finch 2016; Gonzalez, Martinez, and Miller 2019). Adult learners “have been treated as higher education’s afterthoughts” (Blumenstyk 2018, 4). Despite being the moral responsibility of public higher education leaders to address the aforementioned concerns (Levin 2007), there are implications that exist that impact everyone. There are population implications, economic growth implications, as well as institutional and state implications. Examples include economic value, social mobility, institutional opportunity cost, and state and national economic growth.

Purpose

This study concentrated on a university that offers four-year degrees and has on-campus housing and selective

admissions; more specifically, it is a Division I and Research I university. However, scholars note various levels of neglect toward adult learners as systemic across the higher education landscape (Blumenstyk 2018; Hansman and Sissel 2001; Knowles 1990; Levin 2007; Quinnan 1997). The systemic marginalization of adult learners by higher education institutions is a problem because most jobs today require some level of post-secondary education (Carnevale, *et al.* 2018; Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland 2017). Despite this well-known credential requirement for a better job and overall quality of life (McMahon 2009), hundreds of thousands of people 25 to 65 years old are left behind with only a high school diploma (United States Census Bureau 2022; Lumina Foundation 2024). A high school level education is no longer enough for adults to achieve social mobility and rake the value of postsecondary education (USDE 2016). Even though a high school diploma meets the education requirement for 20 percent of good jobs in America, a bachelor’s degree is still the leading conduit to economic opportunity (Carnevale, *et al.* 2018).

Higher education institutions overlook the economic opportunity that the adult learner market brings; in addition, they are not anticipating threats lurking at their front door. According to the 2020 Knocking at the College Door report produced by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), the high school student pipeline is predicted to shrink (Bransberger, Falkenstern, and Lane 2020). The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis conducted by Doug Lederman for Ruben, De-Lisi, and Gigliotti (2017), notes the decline in traditional-age students as a threat to the higher education landscape, particularly to colleges that depend on the eighteen to 22-year-old undergraduate. In short, “if every high school student earned a college credential, more than two-thirds of states would still have degree attainment rates below 60 percent by 2025” (Pingel and Neal 2017, 1). Adult learners are needed to offset this gap (Soares 2013). In addition to the high school-to-college pipeline shortage projection, shifting demographics alert us that business as usual is not going to work (Campbell, Groh and Finch 2016; Curtin 2019; Perlich 2019).

In brief, the pressure to focus resources on the activities that yield the most return on investment (ROI), as well as the potential influence of perception and view about adult learners, may have SEM leaders cornered to make decisions that are not inclusive of adult learners and ignore the implications.

Literature Review

Who is an adult learner?

This question continues to be part of the introduction of articles and studies on this subject nationwide. Even though the nation does not agree on what to call nor how to track undergraduate adult learners, post-traditional students, and come-backers—all most commonly known as nontraditional students—they are most often identified as students who are 25 years or older (Blumenstyk 2018; Choy 2002; NCES 2015; Wesley 2018). Identifying adult learners by age is a start; however, it is vital to include life circumstances that shape their reality and identity (Blumenstyk 2018; Gonzalez, Martinez, and Miller 2019; Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm 2001). Using age as the only indicator would exclude a large number of adult learners; for example, those who have dependents and need to work full-time at a younger age, and those who delay their postsecondary enrollment. The following characteristics, individually or in combination, emerged as this study dived into the sea of literature that describes the adult learner: age 25 years or older; married; with a dependent(s); a single parent; a dislocated worker; incarcerated individuals; military-connected; limited to part-time course load; working fulltime while enrolled; partially educated with some college but no degree; delaying enrollment into postsecondary organized education; adults lacking a high school diploma or the equivalent; and adults financially independent (Aslanian 2017; Carnevale and Smith 2018; Guidos and Dooris 2008; Hinckley, Mills, and Cotner 2011; Simi and Matusitz 2016; Soares 2013; Taylor and Bicak 2019; Thelin 2011). Goldie Blumenstyk (2018) defined an adult learner this way: “In short, anyone who doesn’t fit the model of the 18-to-24-year-old undergraduate residing on or near a campus” (10).

The SEM Leader

SEM is fundamental to a higher education institution because, through policies and processes, it defines how an institution will recruit, admit, retain, and graduate students. However, SEM also determines the type of student the institution will seek to recruit (Hossler, *et al.* 1990; Hossler, *et al.* 2015). SEM is the latest coined term to describe the advancement in enrollment management practices within the higher education landscape (Hossler, *et al.* 2015). However, too often, EM is only associated with recruitment and student financial aid, when in reality, EM is more extensive, including “student academic success and student persistence” (Hossler 2000, 79). Therefore, the role of a SEM leader has become vital at higher education institutions. However, institutions may or may not have an EM division or department; therefore, the SEM leader position level may vary from associate vice president to director, or manager. The position level and title depend upon the campus size and how the president embraces SEM practices (Hossler, *et al.* 2015). For this study, the term manager, leader, or agent refers to the highest-ranking SEM position available at the institution. The goal of the SEM leader is to work together with other divisions to achieve institutional goals. Bontrager (2008) notes that “the primary task of SEM managers is to manage revenue, prestige, and diversity” (4). SEM leaders are tasked with more than increasing student enrollment; they are in charge of selecting the right student—the student who fits the ethos voice and aspirations of the institution (Liedtke 2013). Identifying, recruiting, admitting, retaining, and graduating students is the fundamental mission of the SEM division/department; however, it is no easy task since it needs to be accomplished by bringing together various departments (Hossler, *et al.* 2015). For example, the SEM leader seeks to have fruitful relationships with members of the presidential cabinet, including the chief officers in academic affairs, student affairs, development, and marketing. Fruitful partnerships are fundamental to the development of a SEM plan.

The literature identifies several factors that influence the development and implementation of a SEM plan. The most commonly-identified pieces include

mission and vision statements, institutional strategic plans, financial considerations, federal and state policy pressures, lack of campus integration, outdated or limited SEM practices, and change-avoidance (Hossler D. R. 2004; Hossler, Beam, and Associates 1990; Hossler, *et al.* 2015; Kezar and Posselt 2020). It is important to note the high importance of these influencing factors as they may have short—and long-term—consequences. As best said by Kezar and Posselt (2020), failure to enhance the student profile and meet net revenue goals has job security consequences” (151). The literature also touches on potential influencers of SEM; such as coalition amongst stakeholders and perception and attitude toward adult learners (Hansman and Sissel 2001; Manning 2013; Quinnan 1997).

Perception and View About Adult Learners

The language used by much of the literature frames the nontraditional prospective student (*i.e.*, adult learner) as an unwise business decision (Hansman and Sissel 2001; Simi and Matusitz 2016), hence, the question of the influence of the perception and view (*i.e.*, possible predispositions) about adult learners by decision-makers in SEM divisions. This study has not found literature that addresses the impact of potential bias (deliberate or unconscious) toward adult learners by decision-making leadership in SEM. However, ageism has been addressed in the higher education sector (Jackson and Leon 2010; Karin 2015; Simi and Matusitz 2016). In addition, authors such as Hansman and Sissel (2001) bring a critical lens that confronts the status of adult learners in higher education. The very essence of labeling with deficit terms such as nontraditional, commuter, or reentry reflects the lack of privilege that adult learners experience and frames them as marginal and needy. “Whether it is policy, program, attitudes, classroom environment, or funding support, adult learners face institutional neglect, prejudice and denial of opportunities” (Hansman and Sissel 2001, 18). Quinnan (1997), using a critical theory lens, argued that higher education focuses on developing the young workforce and purposely represses adult visibility and access to education in order to keep adults in the workforce. Castro (2014) argues that when deficit

language is used to label students of color, they are then viewed as problems. “When the institutional label of ‘at-risk’ is grouped together with other nondesirable categorizations, such as ‘probation’ and ‘liability,’ it serves as a euphemism for negativity and sends a clear message regarding what ‘at-risk’ means: a nondesirable student” (415). “The term ‘at-risk’ students is attached to nontraditional students because they possess characteristics or traits that impede their progression in college at the same rate level as the norm—that is, traditional students” (Levin 2007, 23). Language matters, and it has consequences (Bensimon and Watson Spiva 2022; Castro 2014; Kezar and Posselt 2020). Kezar and Posselt (2020) encourage social justice leaders that seek to challenge the higher education establishment, to be aware of language used to frame discourse on problems and solutions.

Higher education has decades of deep roots in its original design and for whom—young pupils heading to college straight out of high school (Hansman and Sissel 2001; Thelin 2011). For example, elite institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, dominated media attention between WWI and WWII with imagery that portrayed what a great American university looks like (Thelin 2011); during this time, going to college had become a big part of the American dream and necessary to achieve social mobility. It was the place for young adults to become critical thinkers and enjoy college life—the place where unrestrained parties and “youthful indiscretions were tolerated and even encouraged as part of the process of upward social mobility that college facilitated” (Thelin 2011, 213–214). Such college life activities have been covered by media outlets which would amplify the appealing image envied by “colleges whose activities were not being covered by the press,” *e.g.* Ohio State University (Thelin 2011, 214). The adult learner continues to not fit this mold; therefore, it hinders the status quo and disrupts the college image and brand, becoming the unwanted student (Blumenstyk 2018; Gonzalez, Martinez, and Miller 2019; Hansman and Sissel 2001; Merriam and Bierema 2014; Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 2007).

On the one hand, SEM leaders are faced with tough enrollment management decisions (Kezar and Posselt

2020), and often groups of students in need of resources don't get included in SEM plans (Hossler, *et al.* 2015). On the other hand, adult learners are described and referred to with language that portrays them as a liability—needy, academically unprepared, disruptive of the status quo, and likely to drop out—an unwise business decision (Hansman and Sissel 2001; Quinnan 1997). This viewpoint likely makes adult learners subject to implicit or unconscious bias resulting in justified-exclusion from SEM plans. Backhun, *et al.* (2019) write, “Unconscious (or explicit) biases are learned stereotypes that are automatic, unintentional, deeply engrained, universal, and able to influence behavior. We are all subject to unconscious bias (UB)” (259). Unconscious biases or blindspots as Banaji and Greenwald (2013) describe them, are well documented, and are linked to influencing behavior, as are the array of recommendations to minimize their impact (Backhun, *et al.* 2019; Banaji and Greenwald 2013). Whether biases are explicit or unconscious, it is well known that colleges and universities struggle to meet the needs of those most marginalized—women, people of color, people with disabilities, and adult students (Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm 2001; Quinnan 1997). Strategic enrollment managers are no exception. Hossler, *et al.* (2015), in what is considered a comprehensive guide that serves as a sourcebook for SEM practitioners, includes a chapter by Mary K. Hutchens that discusses nontraditional students and student persistence. Even though the chapter highlights the importance of the consideration of nontraditional students by enrollment managers, it emphasizes their lack of persistence and the likelihood that they will drop out. This chapter is loaded with deficit language regarding adult learners. It highlights literature that supports their drive to attend community colleges for an associate's degree and/or vocational track and how it is difficult for them to acquire financial aid because of the income working adults earn. It is important to question why adult learners gravitate toward community colleges without assuming that they are of low academic quality. Could it be that adult learners are inclined toward community colleges due to the extensive track record these institutions have in primarily catering to adult learner students?

This study does not view adult learners' preference for community colleges or technical education as indicative of a deficit. Instead, it focuses on the language used to acknowledge their nontraditional student status. That is, nontraditional students have high attrition rates, attend part-time, have work responsibilities, are often first-generation college students, do not have a high school diploma (they have a GED or neither), play multiple life roles (spouse, caretaker, and/or has dependents), and show a lack of participation on campus. If the language in the literature frames the nontraditional prospective student as hard to enroll, retain, and graduate (*i.e.*, a liability—not a wise business decision), then how can one expect SEM leaders to include them in SEM plans? What would be the incentive to prioritize such high-liability prospective students, particularly if the SEM leader reading chapter seventeen of Hossler, *et al.* (2015) represents a four-year institution that has historically focused on traditional college students? The exclusion of adult learners is justified because they are not the targeted student prospect, and the cycle of exclusion continues.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design with a holistic single-case study methodology of exploratory nature (Yin 2018) because of this study's nature and underlying purpose. This study is of an explanatory nature because it explains how SEM leaders' undergraduate college experience, leadership style(s), and beliefs and perceptions about adult learners influence the prioritization of adult learners in SEM plans. A qualitative approach was best suited to this study because it sought to characterize the interpersonal attitudes and perceptions about adult learners by high-ranking SEM leadership (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Qualitative research usually requires a small pool of participants—selecting the right participants is more important than the number of participants—because its data collection is in-depth, purposeful, and nested in context (Merriam and Tisdell 2016; Miles, Huberman, Saldaña 2014). A highly prestigious, research-one, four-year public university with selective admissions in the United States was

selected as the participating institution and noted as the bonded system (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The selected university is referred to, by pseudonym, as Finch University. In addition, Finch University is a member of the IVY-FLOCK—also a pseudonym—a prestigious conference of collegiate organizations around athletics composed of universities. Because this study explored the perception of SEM leaders toward adult learners, five members of the core leadership team with SEM decision-making authority within the EM division were selected as participants. Participants are referred to with gender-neutral pseudonyms. Data collection included individual semi-structured interviews, a survey prior to each interview, and a collection of artifacts including emails, reports, screenshots of website visits, periodical announcements, and university publications. This study followed a list of strategies that bring trustworthiness that included triangulation and data saturation as recommended by scholars (Bowen 2008; Merriam and Tisdell 2016; Miles, Huberman, Saldaña 2014). NVIVO computer software was used to code and derive themes. Moreover, transcription and data coding of all data collected was done by the author. This study used a combination of coding that included In Vivo, Values, and Emotion coding (Miles, Huberman, Saldaña 2014).

It is important to remind the reader of the author's positionality and how it relates to this study's findings and interpretations of the findings (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Reflection on research positionality as an asset and a liability was critical to the trustworthiness of this study. The author's intersectionality of identities and lived experiences shaped the worldview and fueled passion for this study's narrative. The author has experienced the problem of practice addressed in this study and can relate to and validate what the literature states about adult learner challenges and motivations. In addition, the author has experience in admissions and enrollment, as well as state-level higher education experience. Moreover, the conversations the author has had with hundreds of nontraditional students enhanced the critical lens and positioned the author to ask the research questions (RQ) noted below.

- **RQ1:** What is the SEM historical context, how is SEM led, and how does SEM operate at Finch University?
- **RQ2:** How are adult learners viewed and perceived by SEM leaders?
- **RQ3:** How do SEM leaders' undergraduate college experience, leadership style(s), and beliefs and perceptions about adult learners influence the prioritization of adult learners in SEM plans?

Results

This study was in-depth, purposeful, and nested-in-context analysis (Merriam and Tisdell 2016; Miles, Huberman, Saldaña 2014). The data analysis of all three research questions revealed a total of 21 themes. Table 1 (on page 27) shares the list of all the emerging themes.

Discussion

The following seven meta-inferences emerged from the analysis of the 21 themes that emerged from the research questions. In the following discussion and literature integration, problematic and thought-provoking findings are included that help further understand the origins of the exclusion of adult learners and the consequences it has on various shareholders (*e.g.*, enrolled students, prospective students, the university, and EM leaders).

Lack of a SEM Plan Weakens Strategic Retention Efforts

Data show Finch University has no formal SEM plan guiding its EM goals and practices. Further, its SEM journey has been slow and challenging. Nonetheless, the EM division structure at Finch has evolved in progressive ways that make it effective in terms of admissions. However, the lack of a SEM plan has held Finch University in the past with outdated EM practices that only focus on growth and competition. As a result, Finch has experienced the implications that SEM scholars have noted. For example, Hossler, *et al.* (2015) note, "the creation of a SEM plan is among the most critical planning tasks for most institutions" and further point out that the "pervasive shortfall of SEM plans

TABLE 1 ► Emerging Themes

Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
► The Lack of SEM Paradigm has Consequences ► SEM is a Slow Journey ► Challenges Experienced by EM Leadership ► Pressure Points (Internal): ↳ Competing Priorities ↳ Admitting the Archetype Student: Class Shaping ↳ Institutional Culture of Colleges ↳ Financial Considerations ↳ Enrollment Processes ► Pressure Points (External): ↳ Competitors ↳ COVID-19 Pandemic ► Helping Students Means Admitting the <i>Right</i> Students ► EM Leaders Define SEM Differently ► EM Pays Lip-service to Retention ► Sophisticated Technology and Recruitment Tools Guide Strategy ► Class Shaping: In-state VS Out-of-state High School Students	► Adult Learners are Defined, Viewed, and Perceived as <i>Different</i> ► Top-level Leader(s) Need to set Adult Learners as a Priority ► The EM Division is not set up to Support Adult Learners ► Other Directives Take Priority ► A Deficit Language Ideology Follows Adult Learners ► Questions about Adult Learner Inclusion Influenced Participants' Behavior	► All Participants had a First-year Traditional College Experience ► Leaders Attended a Large Four-year University ► Undergraduate Employment Influenced SEM Career Pathway ► Important Leadership Qualities and Skills for EM Leadership ► Leadership Intrinsic Motivation ► The Guiding Leadership Philosophy is Get the Job Done

is the overreliance on traditional planning in the form of strategies and tactics intended to boost recruitment or retention rates” (533). Data show that Finch University chiefly focuses its EM division on developing and implementing tactics to maximize the recruitment and enrollment of prospective students, not on the retention of current students. This is problematic because leadership from other departments within the institution work siloed because of departmental goals, as is the case at Finch University. Hossler, *et al.* (2015) caution,

many institutions find themselves locked into a short-term planning cycle that is focused on meeting the coming year's budget expectations, attempting daily to respond to a steady stream of anecdotes of recruitment or retention shortcomings, along with a virtually endless list of proposed initiative for correcting them (533).

Hossler, *et al.* (2015) further referenced Bontrager and Green's (2012) list of consequences for solely focusing on short-term planning and indicated that “the result is staff overload, limited return on investments, and failure to meet enrollment goals” (533). One partic-

ipant said it this way, “That’s just the reality, so there’s a lot of pressure there.” Data analysis shows that Finch is highly siloed; financial considerations and prestige upholding are of intense pressure; Finch focuses on enrollment and pays lip-service to student retention; and the EM leadership team has a limited understanding of SEM concepts. The lack of SEM understanding and disjointed practice manifests in the absence of alignment with student retention and completion.

Getting the right student in the door is the driving paradigm for the EM division; however, completion—supporting students through graduation—is not within the purview of the EM division. Enrollment management leadership defines SEM as the “means by which institutions seek to influence and shape enrollment.” This was the definition given by the top-level leader and aligns with the actions of the EM division. The EM division “pay[s] lip service to the importance of it [student retention],” said an EM leader when discussing the alignment between EM and student retention. Moreover, EM leaders view having shaped the first-year student class correctly as having met their duty to stu-

dent retention efforts. This finding is highly concerning because, according to SEM scholars, SEM is grounded in the belief that student enrollment is aligned with student persistence and graduation (*i.e.*, student success). Identifying, recruiting, admitting, retaining, and graduating students are SEM's fundamental purpose (Bontrager 2008; Hossler 1990; Hossler 2000; Hossler, *et al.* 2015). Moreover, SEM scholars such as Hossler and Kalsbeek (2013) and (Kalsbeek D. 2013), as well as Hossler, *et al.* (2015) recommend that—when in doubt—student retention responsibilities be housed within SEM divisions because “professionals in SEM are always aware that their task is to enhance institutional performance in all areas related to student enrollment, including retention and completion rates” (Hossler, *et al.* 2015, 41). Lastly, paying lip-service to student retention is problematic because the *some college no credential* population continues to be on the rise, as reported by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in its 2023 report.

A Market-Centered Orientation that Undermines Equity

Finch University is ambitious about expanding its footprint across the nation (and it has been for several years now); it has a particular student in mind that fits its aspirations and responsibility to the IVY-FLOCK—a prestigious athletics conference that was also noted by participants as a strong pressure point. Also, Finch has a reputation and status to uphold within its state and across the nation. Therefore, Finch University aligns with what SEM literature refers to as a market-centered orientation (Bontrager 2008). Bontrager (2008) says,

that the market centered orientation focuses on the institution's market position relative to other institutions of higher education, with the goal of ensuring the competitiveness of its academic programs and elevating its position within its targeted audiences or markets (17–18).

This is thought-provoking because orientations are relevant as the institution grapples with balancing student and institutional interests. It is pertinent to note that a market-centered perspective of EM is not necessarily a flawed approach to driving EM. Scholars

note that to apply the S into EM and formally embrace strategic enrollment management, institutions must hold and understand their institutional market position and competitive advantage. However, scholars warn that institutions often adopt ineffective SEM practices (fueled by the obsession to compete with competitors outside their market position) that focus on the short-term outcomes that assume market-position change can easily be achieved, to only learn that such obsession only yields social-economic inequities and the erosion of precious resources at the expense of students (Hossler, *et al.* 2015).

Finch University's strong focus on enrolling the easily capturable high school senior, as EM leaders note, is leaving thousands of adult learner prospective students without postsecondary opportunities at Finch. As previously noted, Finch's EM division is solely focused on the recruitment and admissions of students who are about to graduate from an in-state or out-of-state high school. Moreover, out-of-state high school students present a significant opportunity, in part because of the tuition revenue Finch can generate from out-of-state students. A secondary student pipeline, but of fickle priority, is transfer students. Both pipelines help shape the first-year student class. Transfer students are often considered adult learners and are viewed (by EM leaders) as a population that is expected to transfer from the local community college; therefore, transfer students are of fluctuating priority to the EM division and depend on desire and funds. The fickle priority given to transfer students is inequitable. Transfer students are known to be at a disadvantage as they navigate their way to a four-year university, particularly students from low-income families (Bastedo, Altbach, and Gumport 2016, 365). Community colleges have a long history of predominantly serving adult learner students (Levin 2007; Quinnan 1997). Hossler, *et al.* (2015) noted that,

surprisingly, several studies found that neither institution [home nor destination] does enough in this capacity [advise transfer students] and instead, the student frequently relies on his or her ability to advocate and/or investigate on their own or seeks out advice from friends and family” (132).

Hossler, *et al.* (2015) further recommended that EM leaders be inclusive of transfer students by saying, “Viewing transfer students services as a key strategy in the race for better completion numbers is an area more than worthy of attention” (142). In short, Finch’s sole focus on enrollment and competition undermines equity goals because they leave adult learners without opportunity.

Understanding Finch’s marketplace position relative to its competitors is a key that EM leaders must master in order to effectively implement its market-centered orientation and ultimately add the “s” of strategic to EM (Bontrager 2008; Hossler, *et al.* 2015; Kalsbeek D. H. 2006). However, scholars like Hossler, *et al.* (2015) remind EM leaders that:

The implications and consequences of this market-centered view of higher education’s obsession go well beyond the futures and fortunes of individual institutions. As noted earlier, the distribution of institutional wealth and advantage reflects the accumulation and amassing of all forms of social capital, and the inequitable access to that social capital provides and perpetuates ‘advantage for the advantaged’ in the United States (100–101).

Hossler, *et al.* (2015) also notes that institutions can embrace more than one orientation as they seek to become more strategic and equitable, and this is an opportunity for Finch University if it were to peruse a more equitable approach to its EM strategy.

Pressure Points: Financial Factors Are Most Important to EM Divisions

This study found pressure points internal and external to Finch University that EM leadership face as they navigate the complexity of SEM. The collective theme is that all pressure points influence, in one form or another, the development of EM plans and strategies and shape the world of EM. However, the data show that financial considerations are the number one influencer or pressure point for EM leaders. In turn, the pressure from meeting enrollment numbers to preserve economic vitality is severe and of high priority. “That’s just the reality, so there’s a lot of pressure there,” said one study participant. Considering that job security

can potentially be at stake (Kezar and Posselt 2020), EM leaders are likely without a choice but to follow suit to keep the EM division functioning at a status quo and keep a sense of urgency to meet the metric-based enrollment goal set by the university president. Ethics scholars also warn that the first sign of ethical collapse is the pressure to maintain numbers, and the second sign is fear and silence: “Few challenge the status quo because those who do so are publicly shamed, demoted, or dismissed” (Johnson 2015, 324–325). In addition, SEM scholars warn that when an institution only considers financial outcomes by enrollment quotas, then less popular student populations are not prioritized; the temptation and subjectivity to “sacrifice ethics to achieve desired enrollment outcomes still exist” and are considerable pressure points (Hossler, *et al.* 2015, 570). Hossler, *et al.’s* (2015) warning stands true because data analysis showed that enrollment managers are subject to the influence of donors and college deans, and less popular students (*i.e.*, adult learners) are not prioritized. That said, Finch does not rely solely on enrollment revenue. Hossler, *et al.* (2015) noted that “an analysis of admission factors would be incomplete without mention of pressure points that can be placed on admission decisions. These include the influence of donors and legislators that hold the purse strings that support higher education” (155). Hossler, *et al.* (2015) were referencing the 2009 high-profile admissions scandal that the University of Illinois found itself in, where underqualified but well-connected applicants were getting admitted. The fine line that holds unethical practices can slowly or easily fade. As Johnson (2015) notes:

The first sign of ethical trouble is obsession with meeting quantifiable goals. Driven by numbers, companies overstate sales, hide expenses, make bad loans, and ship defective products. Nonprofits also feel the pressure to reach their goal numbers. Universities want to be ranked highly by U.S. News & World Report and other publications, so they may lie about graduation and placement rates (324).

Finch has multiple revenue streams that sustain its financial vitality; however, the pressure to meet enrollment numbers is severe and of high priority. “Enroll-

ment is revenue,” said one study participant. The data showed that enrollment goals are often set by the president and lack supporting data and analysis. A participant explained it this way,

there was a goal of [7,000] Freshmen every Fall. I'll be honest with you; I think that number just sounded good. I've never found out, I'm like, okay, how did you come to that? What analysis of growth, marketing? There's nothing that backs that up. [7,000] just sound good. Honestly, that happens quite a bit.

The limited decision-making authority and involvement around the president's significant enrollment goals are of great concern because they trigger a sense of urgency and frustration, as expressed by participants. SEM scholars argue that EM goals should not be placed and mandated by one person, but they should be data and mission-driven, with EM leadership as part of the decision-making (Hossler, *et al.* 2015).

Sophisticated Technology but Inequitable Application

The EM division uses high-level technology to drive and execute its strategies and justify its decision-making. However, the data analysis shows that such technology is not used to support adult learners. The EM leadership team uses its sophisticated CRM system(s) to strategically target states, allocate and propel student recruiters, develop strategies and goals, and maximize student yield. “I mean [CRM name] is this magical thing, and so most colleges are using [it] at this point, because it is such an incredible tool,” said one study participant. Various CRM systems support higher education institutions, and they have become the norm and of high priority. Hossler, *et al.* (2015) note the “creation of tools that empower campus officials to access information readily to create a culture of data-driven decision-making” as one of the five critical core functions to drive institutional goals and effective enrollment management (433). The CRM systems are vital for in-state and out-of-state goal setting and goal execution. For example, the dance between balancing in-state and out-of-state recruitment, which is of great importance to the EM leadership team

because of state mandates and the more considerable tuition revenue that out-of-state students bring, is dependent on the CRM system.

However, Finch University is not using and leveraging its high-tech CRM system for adult learners. EM leaders spoke enthusiastically about their magical CRM system that enabled them to zoom into other states' high schools and see every detail of student movement. The deliberate disregard or desire to utilize (or innovate with) CRM to recruit adult learners is problematic because of publicly-funded institutions' responsibility to state citizens (*e.g.*, adult learners).

On the one hand, data analysis shows that the EM division is only responsible for recruiting and admitting students (from in-state and out-of-state high schools) who will succeed in college, to ensure high ranking and status within the IVY-FLOCK and to secure financial institutional vitality. Further, the action of recruitment and admission of a student who is perceived as not likely to succeed is viewed as a disservice to the student, institution, and community. On the other hand, data analysis shows that the perception toward adult learners is that they are a different population and not easy to recruit, and Finch University is not designed to serve them; furthermore, enrollment leaders assume and view adult learners as a population that gets served by other departments within the institution and out of their purview. Enrollment management leaders claim not to have the time or resources to determine where and how to recruit prospective adult learners. These findings are of great concern and support the purpose of this study—adult learners are marginalized, neglected, and often of no priority (Quinnan 1997; Knowles 1990; Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm 2001). Finch University has a moral responsibility to its students and its state's prospective students. However, the EM division utilizes its sophisticated technology to recruit *more, better*, and *more diverse* students about to graduate high school. This study's data analysis concluded that the EM division assumes adult learners do not fit the profile; therefore, they strive—using their magical CRM system—to find the high school students who will elevate the competitive advantage of Finch. This is a problem because there

is a larger picture to consider that includes implications that affect many.

Exclusion of Adult Learner Students From EM Planning Has Economic and Equity Costs

A high school level education is no longer enough for adults to achieve social mobility and rake the value of postsecondary education (Carnevale, *et al.* 2018; USDE 2016). Americans with college degrees are more likely to live healthier lives, be more civically engaged in their communities, have good-paying jobs, and experience greater job security. America's students, families, and economic strength depend on a higher education system that helps everyone succeed (USDE 2016). In addition, the Digest of Education Statistics reports that the unemployment rate in 2018 was "generally higher for people with lower levels of education attainment than for those with more education" (Snyder and Dillow 2019, 417). Postsecondary education is a must-have to achieve upward economic mobility. In addition, placing the responsibility of addressing adult learners to someone else is problematic because there is a moral responsibility by publicly-funded higher education institutions (Levin 2007). In addition, as previously noted, business as usual is not going to work because the high school student pipeline is shrinking, and demographics are shifting (Campbell, Groh and Finch 2016; Curtin 2019; Perlich 2019). This finding is of great concern, particularly for institutions that depend on tuition revenue from incoming high school seniors. Adult learners are needed to offset this gap (Soares 2013).

Despite concerns, overall, analysis of the data found that EM leaders view adult learner students as an unwise business decision because they view them as: difficult to identify and recruit; costly to recruit, having low academic quality; and having low enrollment yield compared to traditional college students. Moreover, a deficit language ideology follows adult learners. The language used to describe, define, or reference adult learners is of deficit connotation: they are a liability, costly, and they disrupt the status quo, for example. The leadership philosophy within EM at the participating institution

is to *get the job done*—regardless of leadership style, and the job is to enroll a *more, better, and diverse* first-year student class, and adult learners do not fit the student profile. More, better, and diverse means a large number of high achieving—perceived as likely to succeed in college—high school students about to graduate—preferably from an out-of-state high school—who are diverse by culture and race, not in age. "We have not wanted our academic profile to slip," said one study participant. As said by another study participant, "It's about time and resources, how do we do this [target adult learners], when there's [7,000] students that we can grab by going to two dozen high schools. Obviously, you see what I mean; it's just the economy of effort." These words summarize the sentiments toward adult learners as prospective students. Therefore, adult learners are excluded from the student-profile prioritization process and the development of EM goals. The exclusion of adult learners is justified by the assumption that adult learners are served by other campus departments (*e.g.*, adult education) or other state institutions, and the EM division is not designed to serve them. The following answer serves as an example of the deficit ideology that follows adult learners as prospective students at the participating university, said by the highest-ranking leader interviewed:

Well, I think that an answer to that, being very candid... I don't have enough time... I've got to go where the numbers are. The volume of students that I can get to is most concentrated here [referring to high schools], and I would love to have, you know, sort of ways that I can target and recruit that particular population [of] students. It's just, it's so time-intensive and resource-intensive, and the yield on it is so limited. It's tough to even think about how I would do that. And how, if I do try to do that, what would I have to neglect, my current budget, staffing constraints to make that happen. So, honestly, if I had to let certain things go, that's sort of one of the things I let go and hope that just by osmosis, you know that the university's presence can do some outreach to the, to students who are not in that traditional age bracket... It sounds terrible saying that out loud, but... [the participant smiled and made hand gestures that signaled the reality and bluntness of the statement].

Adult learners as prospective students are perceived resource intensive and of low yield to justify giving them a priority. By this logic, adult learners are shadowed by other priorities that take precedence. Assumptions about adult learners coupled with the deficit language ideology that follows them when described is problematic because they perpetuate the already long history of the needed-yet-neglected status of adult learners (Aoun 2017; Blumenstyk 2018; Hansman and Sissel 2001; Knowles 1990; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2015; Levin 2007; Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland 2017; Pingel and Neal 2017; Quinnan 1997). The assumption that adult learners are an unwise business decision is problematic and contradictory because SEM decisions are to be based on in-depth analysis and data (Hossler, *et al.* 2015).

Data analysis also shows that for adult learners to be part of the conversation, they need to be prioritized by the highest university leadership; however, it is the EM team that informs the highest university leadership about strategies and student profiles. The neglect toward adult learners shown in the data analysis is of great concern and further drives the question of the perception and view toward adult learners by SEM leaders, because EM leaders are charged to inform senior leadership with data reports and analysis. This is a problem because the language used by participants made assumptions about adult learners and framed them as an unwanted population of potential students. The responsibility of EM leaders to inform decision-makers about enrollment strategies coupled with the negative ideology that follows adult learners is problematic. Levin (2007) explained the importance of theoretical orientations and assumptions during the inquiry about adult learners this way:

The concepts and language we use to examine behaviors serve as metaphors or tropes that both enlarge and limit our understanding. How we frame, identify, and understand nontraditional students reflects our ontological preferences and shapes how we see the behaviors or experiences of these students (21).

For example, labeling the recruitment of adult learners as costly puts the blame on the adult learner and frames them as a liability. Moreover, participants' statements assume that adult learners would not increase the class quality and diversity. The language used to describe, define, or reference adult learners is of deficit connotation—a liability, costly, and disrupts the status quo—and this frames adult learner prospective students as an unwise business decision. This finding is of great concern because the literature notes that language matters, has consequences, and shapes solutions (Bensimon and Watson Spiva 2022; Castro 2014; Kezar and Posselt 2020), and “can shape people’s perceptions of others and create ideological preconceptions” (DCFPI 2017, 2).

Lastly, the data analysis shows a noticeable change in participants' behavior when discussing the topic of adult learners. The topic of adult learners made EM leaders pause longer—compared to discussions about traditional students—to articulate answers properly and justifiably. In addition, there were expressions of embarrassment—yet a need to be blunt—when discussing the lack of priority given to adult learners. For example, statements of exclusion were followed by accounts of justification. The changes in behavior were noticeable at various levels with all participants. It was as if talking about adult learners after having an exciting talk about traditional students made participants uncomfortable.

Undergraduate College Experience Informs EM Leaders' Professional Role

The data analysis shows that SEM leaders' undergraduate college experience, leadership philosophy, and beliefs and perceptions about adult learners likely influence the lack of prioritization of adult learners in EM planning. One reason may be that there is no SEM plan, and the SEM paradigm is still under development. However, an important finding is that all EM leaders had their undergraduate first-year college experience as traditional students; they all started college right after high school, lived near or on-campus housing, and participated in college-life activities (in their unique way). Moreover, they all attended large traditional-student-serving four-year universities and only worked part-time while

course-taking. In addition, all SEM leaders (except one) were introduced to the EM career pathway by working at a four-year university predominantly serving traditional college students. For example, participants held a job in the new student orientation program and as a campus tour guide, a job in the convenience store in one of the residence halls, or academic advising. Data showed that adult learners are viewed as different and justifiably excluded from EM planning. Therefore, it is likely that EM leaders—particularly those with decision-making authority—view the first-year student profile as a class composed of traditional students because of possible bias and predispositions informed by their own experiences. This finding is problematic because—as noted in the literature review—unconscious biases or blindspots, as Banaji and Greenwald (2013) describe them, are well documented and are linked to influencing behavior (Backhun, *et al.* 2019; Banaji and Greenwald 2013). Everyone is subject to biases—even well-intended and objective professionals—that influence our beliefs, viewpoints, and paradigms (Backhun, *et al.* 2019). The data analysis concluded that adult learners do not fit within the purview of the EM division of Finch University. Therefore, participants’ possible biases and predispositions may negatively influence any opportunity adult learners may have to be included in EM planning.

The combination of negative predispositions and deficit language ideology can be detrimental to the advocacy for equitable inclusion of adult learners in EM planning and goal setting. Kezar and Posselt (2020) said, “The language of administrators can serve to legitimize or delegitimize equitable and just policies within higher education” (243). Language matters and it has consequences (Bensimon and Watson Spiva 2022; Castro 2014; Kezar and Posselt 2020). Deficit language ideology, statements of justification (*e.g.*, someone else serves them), and data reports crafted to support the positive ROI of high school students, can prove to be a justification for exclusion and trump all moral responsibility and sympathy. As previously mentioned, participants stated that the institutions’ executive leadership needs to prioritize adult learners for them to be included in EM plans. However, EM leaders advise executive leadership with

data reports, analysis, and recommendations. Thus, if EM leaders do not strategically prioritize adult learners, then executive leadership may not as well.

Leadership Philosophy Eclipses Leadership Style(s)

The data analysis concludes that the guiding leadership philosophy within the EM division is to *get the job done*. The job is to “increase the class [in size], the quality, [and] the diversity,” said one study participant, and the job must be done every year regardless of leadership style. The job is to bring a set number—often set by the university president—of diverse (by race, gender, and ethnicity, not by age) of high achieving, first-year students. The job is to bring in the class size needed with the traditional college students who fit the ethos and aspirations of Finch University. The analysis of the data about the self-described leadership styles of participants concluded that there are unique yet very similar leadership styles to motivate and mobilize subordinates and partners to *get the job done*—the leadership philosophy and driving force. An enrollment goal—often set by the president—is a set number (*e.g.*, 7,000 new students every fall), and it is measured by whether it was accomplished or not, “pretty black and white,” said one study participant. The EM leaders have their own style to motivate their team and collaborate with others to meet the set goal.

Data analysis shows that leadership style(s) tend to be servant-based and collaborative-based with a transactional component; for example, leaders focus on developing, supporting, motivating, and mobilizing subordinates to complete the metrics-based job. The shared leadership style philosophy is “leadership is results-driven (maybe even obsessed) while simultaneously attempting to always be a fair broker,” said a senior enrollment manager. In other words, there is a transactional component or expectation between the EM leader and subordinates to get the job done with the support given by the EM leaders. It is of great importance to note that servant-based leadership has been critiqued for its contradictory nature and lack of a consistent theoretical framework (Ruben, De-Lisi, and Gigliotti 2017). For example, servant leadership pres-



FIGURE 1 ➤ Leadership Philosophy: Get the Job Done

ents challenges when the leader is faced with prioritizing the best interest of self, students, or institution (Ruben, De-Lisi, and Gigliotti 2017). The contradictory nature of servant-based leadership is of great concern because of the intrinsic motivation identified in the data analysis. The data analysis found that the intrinsic motivation of EM leaders is driven by personal growth, ambition for self-success, excitement for the whirlwind of activities that surround EM, and supporting student success. As previously stated, helping students means admitting the right students in the first place. However, personal growth and ambition for self-success are of concern when servant-leadership is present because the data analysis concluded that it is likely that EM leaders' motivation for personal growth and ambition for self-success prevents them from challenging the EM establishment. EM leaders are likely to abstain, follow suit, and continue with tradition to safeguard their careers. Figure 1 serves as a sensemaking diagram for the leadership philosophy paradigm.

Recommendations

The following are a set of recommendations that center adult learner students and encourage the enhancement of enrollment management practices at four-year uni-

versities. Moreover, recommendations are intentionally generalizable to preserve anonymity. Lastly, these recommendations are intended for readers to tailor to their institution.

Put the "S" in EM to Embrace SEM

The problem is that higher education institutions with selective admissions do not equitably prioritize undergraduate adult learners in their SEM plans; however, a SEM plan must first exist to encourage the inclusion of adult learners. The first recommendation is to update EM practices and embrace a SEM paradigm as recommended by revered scholars. Hossler, *et al.* (2015), shared that the organized and intensive enrollment practices (*i.e.*, competition) that arose in the 1970s and 1980s gave room to further develop the strategic paradigm that would advance EM practices across the nation; further, SEM is the latest coined term to describe the advancement in EM practices within the higher education landscape. However, the EM practices and principles advancements have not been simultaneous across higher education institutions. Some higher education institutions have embraced the advancement of a SEM paradigm, while others have taken a conservative approach (Bontrager, *et al.* 2012). The data analysis supports

the recommendation to accept a SEM paradigm and implement a SEM plan that will guide the institution(s) for five to ten years, as recommended by the scholars.

In addition, evaluate and acknowledge that SEM leadership may come with having had a very traditional student college undergraduate experience. This presents challenges because even though leadership may sympathize with nontraditional students' challenges and identity, their view of a four-year university's first-year student class is shaped with biases. Moreover, EM leaders may not identify the barriers adult learners face. Based on the findings, this study recommends intentionally diversifying the EM leadership team in terms of experience with adult learner populations and implementing professional development.

Prioritize Adult Learners

First and foremost, the involvement of the governing body (*e.g.*, institutions' board of trustees and or state system(s) board of higher education) is important. Data showed that EM leaders need to know that adult learners are of priority to senior leadership. In other words, the priority of adult learners needs to be set from the top down. For example, a board resolution (institutional, multi-institutional, or statewide system) would solidify the urgency and mandate the inclusion of adult learners in EM planning. Moreover, to overcome the assumptions about adult learners found in this study, an adult learner framework—based on the sea of adult learner literature—needs to be developed and adopted to establish an understanding of adult learners. In addition to a board resolution, driven by the adult learner framework, the creation of a working group or taskforce composed of senior executive SEM leadership is of high importance. However, the board's intervention should be coupled with funding to ease the financial pressure highly noted in the data analysis.

If a state system board exists, its intervention is equally important because the implications noted in this study have an impact beyond one university. Similar to other groups that may regularly convene (*e.g.*, chief diversity officers and chief academic affairs officers), state offices (for example, commissioner's office

within the system of higher education) should support the collaboration of senior executive EM leadership and lead a statewide SEM taskforce with the joint agreement that SEM is needed. Of top priority to the SEM task force, recognize and refrain from using deficit language that frames adult learners as undesirable students and unwise business decisions. The idea of a formal statewide SEM plan is intriguing and not farfetched. A statewide SEM plan composed of SEM plans from institutions within their system of higher education that leverage each institution's individuality and niche would ultimately benefit everyone, including adult learners. Lastly, the intervention of an independent consultant firm is wise to guide SEM efforts because of the lack of SEM understanding and experience found in the study.

Embrace SEM Across System Institutions

In connection with recommendation one, this study recommends that all institutions within their state system of higher education assess and adopt a strategic enrollment management (SEM) paradigm by formulating a formal SEM plan. If a state system does not exist, the collaboration of partner institutions is highly encouraged by this study. It is worth noting that institutions, as per existing literature, tend to be hesitant about sharing their SEM efforts. The aim here is not to enforce SEM implementation as a mandatory requirement. Hossler, *et al.* (2015) provide a comprehensive roadmap for enhancing SEM practices. In addition, Kezar (2014), offers various approaches that agents of change can use within higher education to unify stakeholders. The objective is to cultivate a collaborative environment among enrollment managers across multiple higher education institutions, fostering healthy competition while enhancing their EM strategies.

Strategic enrollment management represents the latest paradigm shift, modernizing enrollment management for the 21st century. SEM practices revolve around the entire student lifecycle, going beyond mere identification, recruitment, and admission of students. This study recommends for the collaboration of the state's system(s) of higher education in advancing SEM practices, focusing on aspects like student retention and

completion to be in alignment with admissions. It's imperative to move beyond superficial support and truly prioritize retention and completion initiatives and not pay lip-service as found by this study.

In addition to the insights from Hossler, *et al.* (2015), and this study's findings, this research emphasizes the importance of involving faculty members. Scholars have long highlighted the distinct learning patterns of adult learners and the inadequacies of traditional pedagogical approaches (Knowles 1990; Merriam and Bierema 2014). Thus, this study strongly recommends the active participation of faculty in the development of SEM plans that seek to be inclusive of adult learners. In addition, faculty members should receive awareness and training in the most effective practices for facilitating the learning of adult students within the classroom setting.

Address the Deficit Ideology That Follows Adult Learners

This study found that a deficit ideology follows adult learners. Various assumptions were found that framed adult learners as an unwise business decision. For example, adult learners were assumed to have a low return on investment (ROI). However, perhaps one reason why the ROI is assumed to be low is that the university does not offer its academic degree programs and credentials in ways that are accessible to adult learners or does not want to step away from historical and traditional ways of operation. SEM engages a broad range of stakeholders (*e.g.* departments) like academic affairs and challenges stepping away from traditional practices that only focus on recruitment. Therefore, learning about adult learners with a positive outlook lens rather than a deficit ideology is highly encouraged.

The main reason adult learners seek organized education is job-related (Merriam, *et al.* 2007). Aslanian (2017) points out that the transition to a new career is the primary motivation for enrolling in undergraduate studies, again, underscoring job-related motivation as the primary reason adults seek organized education. While adult learner students may have different backgrounds and experiences compared to traditional students, this does not equate to lower quality. Adult

learner students often bring unique perspectives and skills; are highly motivated and dedicated to their academic pursuits; and bring life experiences to the educational environment, enriching the learning experience for themselves and their peers (Blumenstyk 2018; Levin 2007). Levin (2007) also adds that "unlike traditional students, nontraditional students are motivated by their adult life experiences and the pressures and forces of work and family (73). Adult learners aren't easily reached through typical marketing campaigns, nor are they confined to high school settings where they're a captive audience for college fairs. However, this doesn't imply they're of low quality or offer a low return on investment (Blumenstyk 2018).

Implement a Statewide Adult Learner Recruitment Campaign

A statewide recruitment campaign is recommended because the implications noted in this study have an impact beyond one university. First, complete an assessment to identify all the services that support adult learner students within the institution. Secondly, based on the findings, strategically build on the low-hanging opportunities to enhance resources. The goal with the second face is to build on the resources—in theory, this would help the institutions be ready for phase three. For example, institutions implementing Degrees When Due—a national campaign focused on improving attainment rates for adult learners—would significantly help the some-college-no-degree population. Finally, phase three is the statewide recruitment campaign. The logic is that it makes no sense to launch a recruitment campaign when the institution lacks systems in place to support adult learners through graduation. Again, national and local scholars note that adult learners as students and prospective students are neglected yet needed (Aoun 2017; Blumenstyk 2018; Hansman and Sissel 2001; Knowles 1990; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2015; Levin 2007; Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland 2017; Pingel and Neal 2017; Quinnan 1997). The statewide campaign needs to be systematically connected to all institutions (particularly EM divisions) within the state's system of higher education. In addition, workforce alignment is critical because

the number one motivator for adults to seek organized education is work related (Aslanian 2017; Johnstone and Rivera 1965; Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 2007). For example, leverage state-level workforce data to promote degrees and certificates that will yield high-paying jobs. Moreover, collaborate with employer partners to compensate certificate and degree holders appropriately. Lastly, it is important to connect the campaign with the Department of Workforce Services to leverage its connection to the dislocated workforce.

Take CRM to New Heights

Along with the idea of a statewide SEM task force that may ultimately produce a statewide SEM plan, a centralized customer relations management (CRM) system is thought-provoking. This study found that the roots of competition are deep, and each institution has its special sauce in serving and supporting students; however, integration of CRM systems or one central yet individualized CRM platform sounds intriguing and in the best interest of students—particularly as they navigate a system of colleges and universities. A sophisticated CRM system(s) is critical to SEM and is the base of strategy development and tactic implementation as well as justification for decision-making. However, as noted in the findings, *age* as a metric to identify prospective students is not always a common practice; therefore, this study recommends tracking age in CRM systems. Even though age (25+) is commonly used to identify adult learner students, it is not the only way. Various identities shape who an adult learner is (*e.g.*, married, having a dependent, or working full-time). However, age is a common and user-friendly way for the institution to identify adult learners, and it is a great starting point. Adult learners—unlike traditional students who are corralled in high schools—are dispersed and require creative or innovative efforts. The magical and sophisticated CRM systems that exist enable institutions to innovate and target adult learner prospective students.

Rethink Student Recruiter Training

The training regimen for student recruiters at a selective-admissions four-year university encompasses spe-

cific components. Drawing from personal experience, it notably involves storytelling and fostering a palpable enthusiasm for college life. This includes narrating anecdotes about vibrant gatherings among young first-year college students at social events, energetic athletic activities, and the sheer enjoyment they experience. For example, the lead trainer emphasizes the importance of personal anecdotes by stating, “If you lack your own engaging story, draw from a friend’s experiences.” However, the training fails to cover essential aspects, such as guiding recruiters on addressing concerns raised by parents of high school seniors who express interest in college for themselves yet have an apprehension about fitting in among the college community. Likewise, it overlooks advising individuals like older siblings, who opted for military service after high school and are now contemplating earning college credits based on their military education.

Enrollment managers might find themselves limited in altering the prioritization of adult learners within their institutions, leaving them to ponder actionable steps within existing constraints. Nonetheless, reconsidering the training regimen for student recruiters represents a readily accessible opportunity, incurring minimal additional expenses. Recruiters should, while engaging with high school students, actively involve their families and acquaintances in discussions about higher education. This entails posing inquiries to all adults regarding their educational aspirations while also sowing the seeds of recruitment for younger siblings. Undoubtedly, high school students maintain their crucial significance in the recruitment process; nevertheless, inclusively involving parents or other family members is a feasible step forward. This involves revisiting and reshaping the training materials and strategies employed by recruiters.

Conduct Future Research

This study did not focus on exposing ageism toward undergraduate adult learners, although Simi and Matusitz (2016) made a strong case and recommended further research on the subject, as have many other scholars mentioned by Nelson (2002; 2017). It is this study’s rec-

ommendation to further expose ageism toward adult learners—both as current students and prospective students—in SEM practices. Data analysis concluded that adult learners are perceived by EM leaders—with decision-making authority—as an unwise business decision. Moreover, adult learners are perceived as different and unqualified to meet the student profile desired. Data analysis also found that the justification for exclusion is based on various assumptions and possible biases toward adult learners. These data support the recommendation to further expose ageism toward adult learner students in higher education spaces and enrollment management practices.

This study found 21 themes (listed in Table 1, on page 27); however, its focus was a four-year university with selective admissions, and with research one and division one status. To seek generalizability, this study recommends the replication of its protocol and model with comprehensive public universities as participating institutions to further triangulate the research.

Conclusion

The problem is not a lack of knowledge or access to literature about how to better serve adult learners; there is a plethora of literature available (Blumenstyk 2018; Johnstone and Rivera 1965; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2015; Merriam and Bierema 2014). The problem is the perception and predispositions about adult learners that decision-makers have—as found in this study—that exclude adult learners from SEM planning.

Higher education is changing, and demographics are changing (Perlich 2019). Moreover, higher education is under threat—the value and purpose of higher

education are questioned (Bastedo, Altbach, and Gumport 2016; EducationDynamics 2023), despite the plethora of literature noting that a high school education is not enough (Carnevale, *et al.* 2018; Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland 2017; McMahon 2009; USDE 2016). It is time to lead the landscape of public higher education with the responsibility that has been bestowed on higher education leaders and embrace strategic enrollment management practices that are holistic in the best interest of students. Adult learners—as students and prospective students—have been neglected for far too long (Hansman and Sissel 2001; Knowles M. 1990; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2015; Quinnan 1997). Higher education leaders know about adult learners—the literature continues to constantly repeat what motivates them and the barriers that exist for them—since Johnstone and Rivera’s famous 1965 study. It’s been over two decades since Hansman and Sissel (2001) stated the following, yet it continues to stand true:

“Adult students are often viewed as invisible and of lesser importance to the traditional core student group, as evidenced by higher education mission statements, publicity and image, and exclusion of adult requirements in the shaping of policies, programs, and outreach (18).

It is time to embrace the new traditional student by allocating retention and completion efforts that align and effectively support adult learners as they get recruited and admitted. It is time to allocate equitable resources to recruiting and admitting adult learners. It is time to envision the year’s fall enrollment season with excitement and enthusiasm that embraces adults starting or finishing their higher education dreams.

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About the Author



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Richard Gonzalez, Ed.D., is the Assistant Commissioner for Adult Learner Access with

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