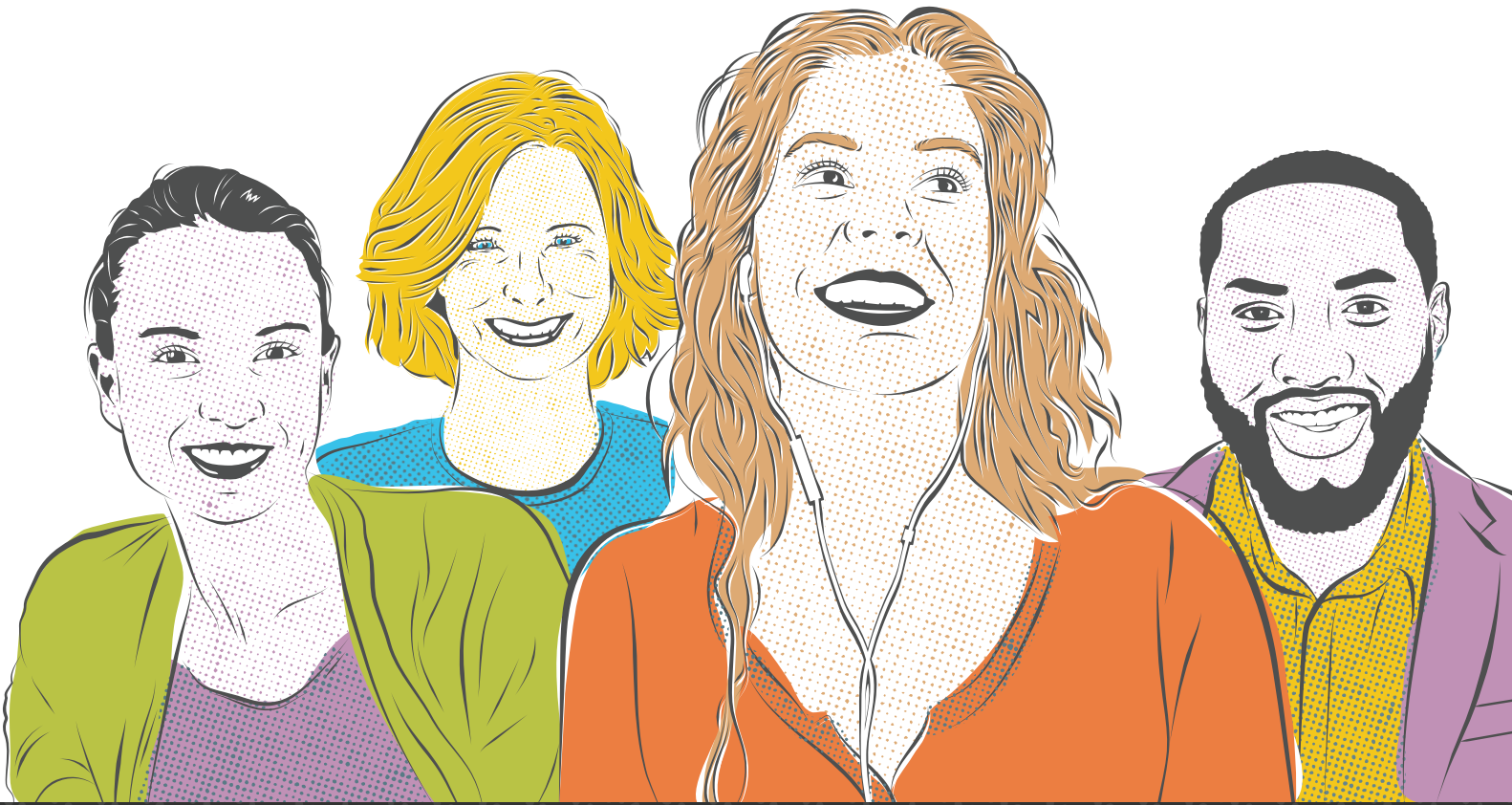


A GUIDE TO

# Recruiting Adult Learners



**There are 95 million potential adult learners in the U.S.  
You can reach this massive market with four personas  
developed by Lipman Hearne.**

**LIPMAN HEARNE.**

# Higher Education is Hitting a Demographics Wall.

**Within the next decade, the characteristics of high school graduates in the United States are expected to shift dramatically. The racial and ethnic makeup of the population—as well as where in the country the students will come from—will affect schools and their ability to recruit new students.**

As the number of traditional students declines, many colleges will struggle to reach their enrollment goals. So what can schools do now to make up for lost students and lost revenue?

The answer: recruit more adult learners.

Nationally, there are 95 million people between the ages of 25 and 65 with a high school diploma but no college degree. That is a huge untapped market. (By comparison, fewer than 3.5 million students graduate from high school every year in the United States.)

These adult learners, also known as nontraditional students, represent a tremendous

opportunity for colleges. But most colleges have little experience recruiting them.

**That's where Lipman Hearne comes in.**

We created this report to help colleges better understand adult learners: what they're looking for in a degree program, how they assess value, which social media platforms they use, and more. We also developed four distinct marketing personas for these nontraditional students to help colleges hone their messages.

It's innovative work—and a great first step toward making adult learners an integral part of any college's marketing campaign.

## What We Did

In January 2019, we conducted an online survey of 1,006 people between the ages of 25 and 54 who had at least a high school diploma but no bachelor's degree, and were considering working toward a bachelor's degree in the next one to two years. Nearly 20 percent of the respondents were currently enrolled in an associate degree program, and 55 percent had earned credits they planned to transfer.

## Why Use Personas?

We believe personas provide a more complete picture of the people our clients are trying to reach. And they help our clients focus their messages.

For this report, Lipman Hearne created four personas for adult learners: Reinventor, Scholar, Changemaker, and Seeker. (The personas are discussed in greater detail on pages 8–11.)

All four personas are based on the desired outcomes driving their search, using data from our 2019 online survey. The profiles were enhanced by media and behavioral information about U.S. adults from the Simmons National Consumer Survey. Using data indexing, the personas pull forward the characteristics that set each segment apart from its counterparts.



# A Massive Market

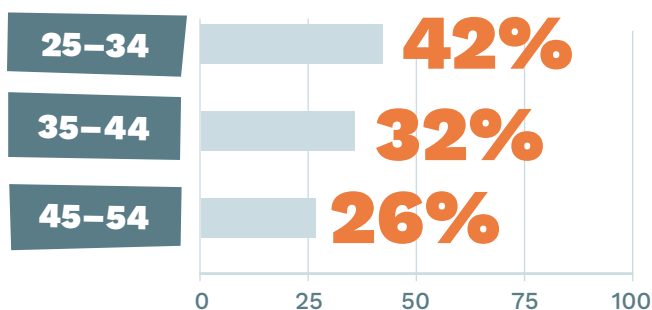
## UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S ADULT LEARNERS\*

**95 MILLION PEOPLE**

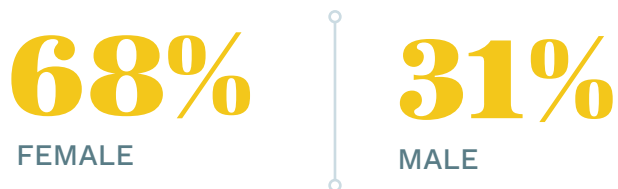
in the U.S. between 25 and 65 do not have a bachelor's degree.

Of those, **53** million have an associate degree or some college credit.

### Age



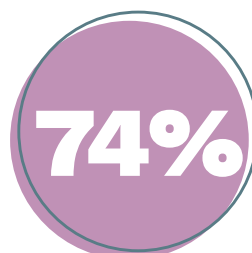
### Gender



### Family Life



### Race/Ethnicity



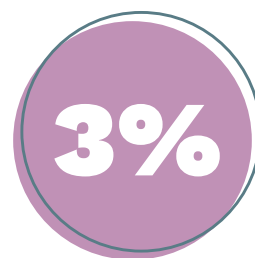
CAUCASIAN



AFRICAN AMERICAN



HISPANIC/LATINO



ASIAN

### THE TAKEAWAY

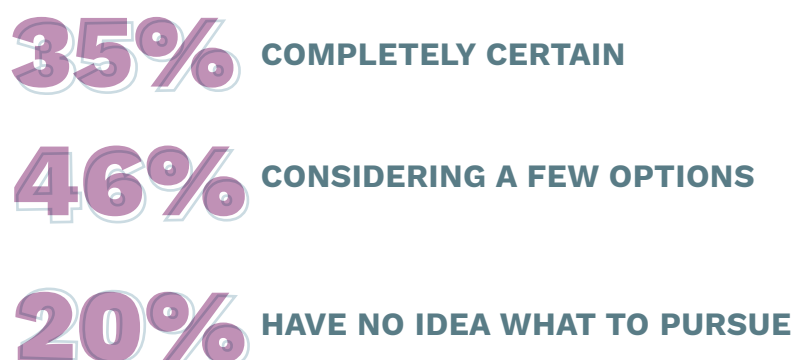
While adult learners skew female and white, many are not. Make your messages speak to a wide and diverse audience.



## Employment Status



## Certainty About Career Plans



### THE TAKEAWAY

More than half of adult learners are now in the workforce. But only one-third are completely certain of the career they want to pursue. Try to show specific examples of how your program can help them succeed professionally.

## Program Format

Sure, online and part-time options are popular. But many people are still interested in a full-time, in-person program.

### PEOPLE CONSIDERING ...



### THE TAKEAWAY

Don't assume that adult learners are only interested in degrees that are offered online or part-time. Tell them about all of your options.

*\*Results are from 1,006 respondents Lipman Hearne surveyed in January 2019. Numbers may not equal 100 percent because of rounding or because participants chose multiple answers to questions.*

# Inside Their Minds

## WHAT ADULT LEARNERS THINK ABOUT COLLEGE\*

### Beliefs About Higher Education

**82%** You learn most of what prepares you for a career through on-the-job training

**70%** A career-related internship in college is essential for professional success

#### THE TAKEAWAY

Adult learners may be skeptical of higher ed, and they need to hear that what they bring to the classroom will be respected. Validate their work experience.

**82%** I want to go to the most affordable college that admits me

**39%** I want to go to the most prestigious college that admits me

#### THE TAKEAWAY

Overall, rankings don't factor in as much as they do for younger students. For adult learners—who often have families and mortgages and other expenses—affordability is key.

### Reasons for Enrollment

**MOST POPULAR**

**LEAST POPULAR**

**#1**

**44%**  
To get a good job

**6%**  
To make friends with people who see the world differently

**#2**

**41%**  
To be confident and prepared for life

**9%**  
To have a great college experience/form lasting friendships

**#3**

**38%**  
To learn where I am headed

**10%**  
To show I can complete a difficult project

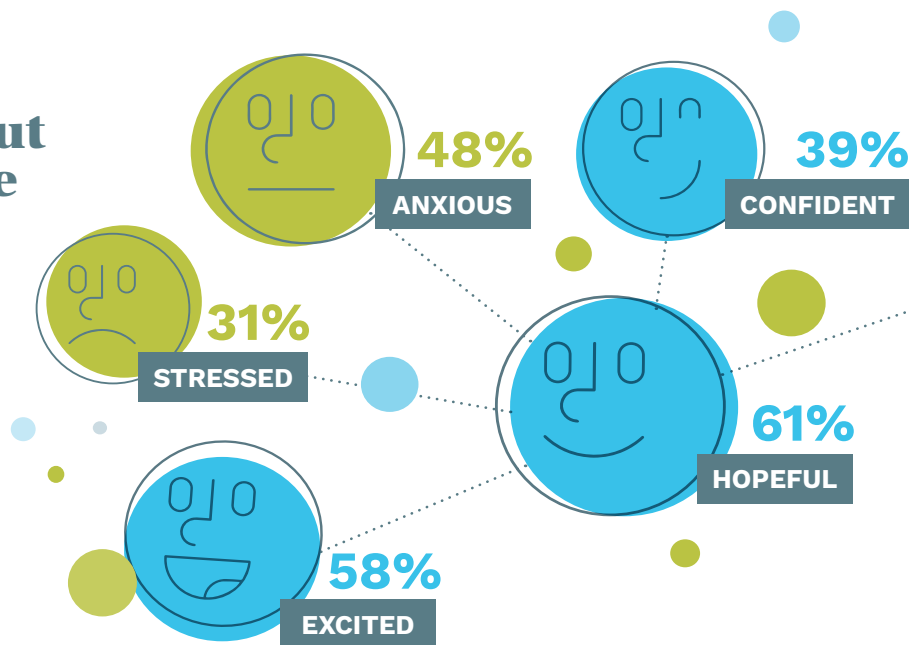
#### THE TAKEAWAY

Reflect emotional outcomes as well as career and financial benefits to deepen your connections with prospects.

## Top 5 Feelings About Enrolling in College

### THE TAKEAWAY

It's a big mix of emotions. Keep these in mind as you communicate with adult learners throughout the process.



## What Defines a “Good Fit”?

**91%** Tuition and fees are affordable

**90%** Class schedule is flexible

### THE TAKEAWAY

Affordability and flexibility are table stakes, but have to be communicated to get your school into the consideration set.

**72%**

Inclusive and welcoming of people from all walks of life

### THE TAKEAWAY

Adult learners are concerned about fitting in. Show diversity, including diversity of age, in materials. Provide a variety of testimonials that essentially say, “You can do this.”

*\*Results are from 1,006 respondents Lipman Hearne surveyed in January 2019. Numbers may not equal 100 percent because of rounding or because participants chose multiple answers to questions.*



**These adult learners have work experience, but for a variety of reasons, they are no longer employed. They want to work again—in an entirely different field.**

Reinventors are extremely pragmatic; a degree is all about getting a better job. Making friends in class and having social opportunities are low on their priority list. They are more likely to believe that where you go to school plays a big part in your future success, so ranking and prestige matter to them more than to other adult learners. And while they aren't completely sure about their career plans, they are unlikely to say they have no idea what they will do.

**Reinventors are:**

- Not certain when they will enroll
- Mostly interested in part-time programs
- Leaning toward online options, but they are open to other formats
- Seeking credit for past experience and want a degree that will provide leadership opportunities and push them above an entry-level position

## THE REINVENTOR

### Christina Simmons

**35-year-old mother and homemaker from a small town in Missouri**

**Husband has a blue-collar job; daughter is in the ninth grade**

**Recently enrolled in an online associate degree program**

**Considering two career paths (medical billing or medical assistant)**

**Lives online; very active on Facebook and also watches YouTube videos**

**Doesn't like ads and skips commercials on the TV shows she records**

**Enjoys reading and baking**

## THE TAKEAWAY

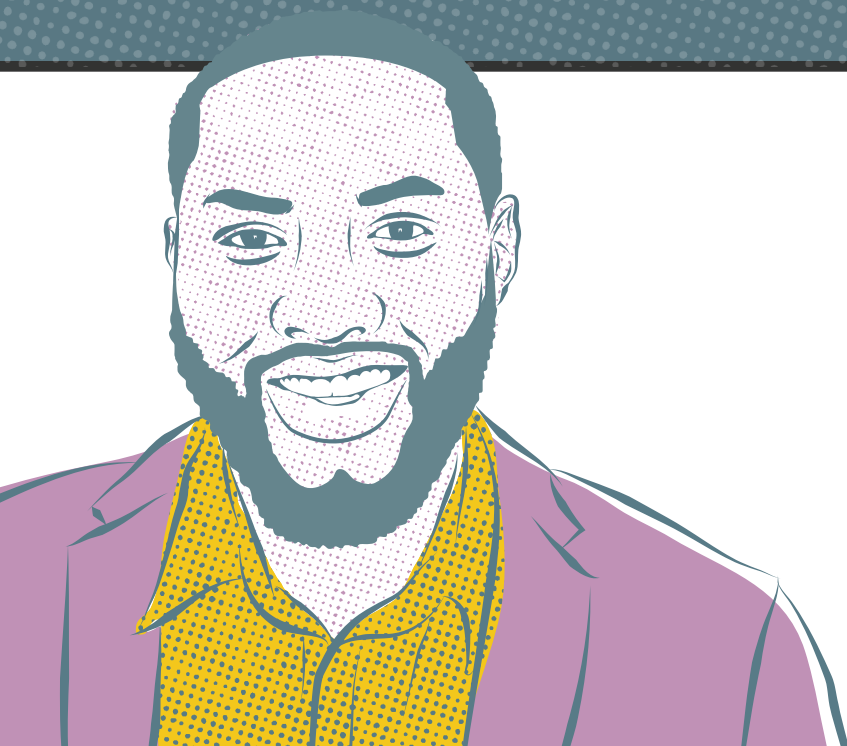
Communications need to be sustained over a long period of time and focused on various options and employment outcomes.

Show how your institution will support the transition back into higher ed: from navigating admissions to academic advising to career counseling.

Address leadership aspirations with student success stories or testimonials that feature graduates thriving in their new careers.

Include rankings, accolades, and third-party validations that signal quality.





**These potential students are seeking a more traditional college experience. They're more likely to be looking at on-campus, full-time programs.** They also are more likely to value a broad education built around critical thinking and challenging projects. They want to make lasting friendships and take part in various activities and organizations on campus. They see college as a way to get ahead both professionally and socially.

#### **Scholars are:**

- Very certain of their preferred career path
- Committed to pursuing a degree in the next 1–2 years
- More likely to be single without children and working outside the home
- Interested in rankings and believe a prestigious college can influence social success

## THE SCHOLAR

### **David Jones**

**38-year-old single male from suburban Chicago**

**Enrolled part-time at the local community college**

**Plans to transfer to a four-year college after earning his associate degree**

**Has worked for the same company for 20 years but is worried about layoffs**

**Wants a career in business so he can increase his salary**

**Interested in the arts and enjoys learning new things**

**Shops in specialty stores and spends time on YouTube**

### THE TAKEAWAY

Emphasize social networks and opportunities to collaborate on projects.

Highlight rankings, academic rigor, and the overall on-campus experience. Tell stories of other students' personal growth.

These adult learners tend to be more interested in small-to-medium-sized private colleges that promise a close-knit and nimble learning environment.

They are confident and knowledgeable about the admissions process. Reflect that confidence back to them with positive, to-the-point language.



**These nontraditional students are determined to make a difference in the world—and they have a few career paths in mind to help them do that. To achieve their calling, they want a custom educational experience focused on their needs.**

The intangible benefits of higher ed—like learning how to think critically and feeling prepared for life—are more likely to be important to them. Institutional rankings and prestige take a back seat to the overall college experience.

#### **Changemakers are:**

- Not certain when they will enroll
- Typically 30–35 years old with no children
- Interested in programs with at least some in-person element
- Not sold on the idea that college is the only way to success

## THE CHANGEMAKER

### **Katie Anderson**

**30-year-old newlywed from Utah**

**Left college after her sophomore year; has an associate degree**

**Works full-time in the procurement department of a biotech start-up**

**Considers herself optimistic and adventurous**

**Has several smart speakers at home and loves listening to music on Pandora**

**Open to advertising as a way to learn more about products**

**Likely to remember advertised products while shopping**

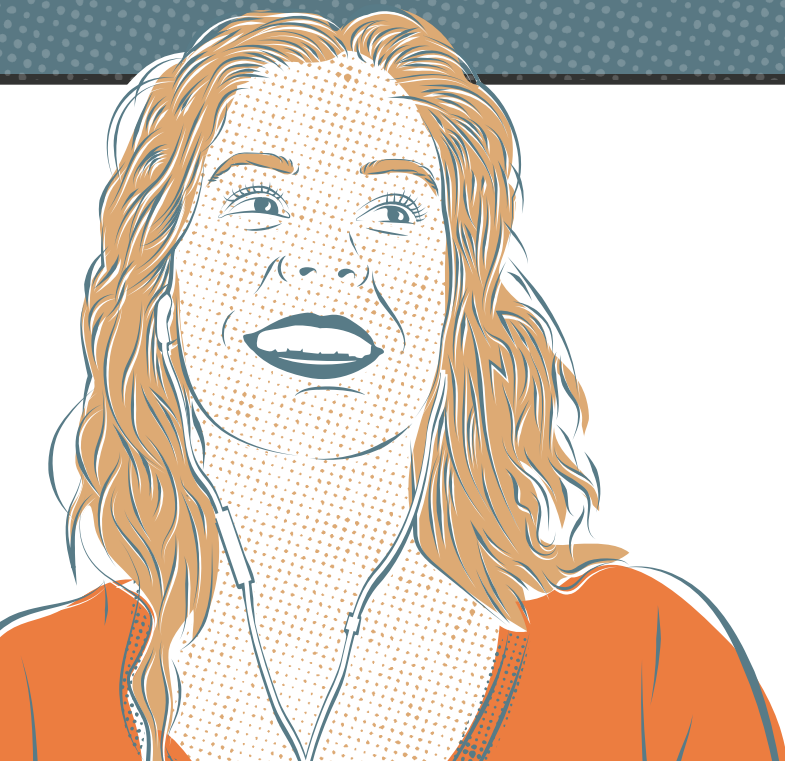
### THE TAKEAWAY

Stress how a college education will help them hit the ground running in their careers.

Show examples of courses that can be customized to help them reach their goals.

Let them know the institution is student-centered, flexible, and supportive.

Position your college or university as a changemaker itself—an institution that bucks the status quo in pursuit of innovative outcomes.



**These adult learners are more likely to be young, single, and unemployed. They don't know which career they want to pursue, but they are looking for a concrete pathway to a good job.**

They're not interested in a fully on-campus option, but they do want the emotional benefits of higher education: confidence, self-awareness, a sense of purpose. The entire process can feel overwhelming to them, and they are looking for support and guidance from the institution.

#### Seekers are:

- Uncertain whether they will pursue a degree
- More likely to feel stressed, frustrated, and anxious
- Looking at small-to-medium-sized private colleges
- Not interested in institutional prestige

## THE SEEKER

### Nicole Moore

**28-year-old single mother from Houston**

**Has bounced between jobs since high school**

**Most recently worked part-time at a card and gift store in a strip mall**

**Considering two career paths (interior design or something in education)**

**Attached to her smartphone—and posts pictures to Instagram in near-real time**

**Makes time in her busy schedule to watch her favorite TV shows**

## THE TAKEAWAY

Get back to the basics. Demonstrate how college can help students find their own path.

Focus messaging on how college and/or a degree can strengthen the skills and abilities they've already acquired.

Present the benefits and ROI of a college education. Highlight hands-on learning—and how students can turn those experiences into a career.

Reassure them of the support they will receive from the campus community: the admissions staff, academic advisors, faculty mentors, and more.

# How Does Pricing Fit Into the Equation?



Annual cost is more important to adult learners than total cost and time to completion. The vast majority of adult learners would pay more overall for a program with lower annual costs—even if it takes longer to complete.

## THE TAKEAWAY

Don't focus your messages solely on total costs. Be sure to highlight annual affordability.

## Three ways personas can help you recruit adult learners

- 1 Identify personas that would be a “good fit” for your institution or programs and then focus your marketing initiatives to best connect with them.
- 2 Create tools—such as a website quiz—to encourage students to self-identify with a persona, which helps you build a custom communications flow.
- 3 Leverage the media consumption habits for each persona to reach audiences where they are.

Want to learn more about the adult learner market?  
Email Lipman Hearne at [info@lipmanhearne.com](mailto:info@lipmanhearne.com).