

Serving Adult Students: What Really Matters? THE "MUST DO" LIST FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

In 2008, Stamats completed a national research project focusing on adult students as part of our ongoing *TALK* research series. The study had two foci: Adults contemplating undergraduate school and adults contemplating graduate school. *Adult StudentsTALK™* allowed us to examine factors that motivate adult students, target specific attributes they are looking for in academic programs, define services they find most helpful, discover how and where they are looking for information, and understand how they plan to attend college.

This *White Paper* highlights six key research findings that should be considered by institutions currently serving or planning to serve adult students. Even if you believe your adult program is doing well, addressing these six areas will help to move your adult student program to a position of optimal recruitment and retention.

Author:
Dr. Brenda K. Harms
Client Consultant
Stamats, Inc.
brenda.harms@stamats.com

INTRODUCTION

For those institutions that have had adult student programs for several decades it is easy to recognize that the competitive landscape has changed significantly. Due to this increased competition, the question of what is really important when it comes to recruiting and retaining adult students is paramount. Discovering the most important factors that influence adult students in their college choice, and capitalizing on those factors through marketing, is critical to the success of your adult student program.

In addition to that challenge, the reality is that only 16 percent of those attending college fit the traditional undergraduate student model—18-22 attending full-time, living on campus (Stokes, 2006). This fact only serves to heighten our awareness of the role adult student programs can serve. As colleges and universities scramble to evaluate and reassess the potential value in their decades old adult student programs, the question that repeatedly resurfaces is: what really matters?

Many adult student programs have long been utilized as a means of expanding the reach of academic programming, generating additional

revenue, and extending the institution's mission and vision to provide educational excellence beyond the traditional student. Examining key areas that are of significant importance to the target market will help move an institution's adult student program from a position of stability to a position of distinction within the marketplace.

For many adult student programs, the dollars that have been allocated to their development, maintenance, and expansion has been minimal. Most schools will cautiously admit that they have done fine on their own and, in many cases, even thrived. But in the world of increased competition from schools just like yours, to say nothing of proprietary schools, the need to focus on what really matters has never been more important. In these days of limited budgets and sparse human capital, what are the "must dos" that institutions should address to successfully recruit and retain the adult student in a way that is more effective than the competition? The answers may be surprising.

Differences in Importance Ratings: Undergraduate vs. Graduate

Undergraduate and graduate degree seeking adults have many of the same priorities, though they differ on some of their most important attributes. Shown below are the top five attributes of most importance:

Undergraduate-seeking adults:

1. Flexibility of class scheduling
2. Cost to attend
3. Location is convenient to home or work
4. Ability to transfer in credits
5. Online learning options

Graduate-seeking adults:

1. Flexibility of class scheduling
2. Faculty are good teachers and mentors
3. Cost to attend
4. Academic reputation of the school
5. Location is convenient to home or work

While academic and faculty quality are top factors for graduate degree seekers, adults looking to complete an undergraduate degree are focused almost solely on convenience and accessibility.

MUST DO #1: RECOGNIZE HOW DIFFERENT ADULT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ARE FROM ADULT GRADUATE STUDENTS

Just as we must use great care when using the label “minority,” we must also exercise caution when using the label “adult.” In both cases, these simple labels mask vast and important differences. One of the most interesting factors that emerged from the research was the differences between the potential undergraduate and graduate student populations. It would be easy to think that two 30-year-olds considering returning to college, one to complete a bachelor’s degree and one to complete a graduate degree, would be looking for and value similar things. What we have learned, however, is that this is not necessarily true.

As is depicted in figure 1, when asked about their motivations to return to college, potential undergraduate students seemed to be significantly more motivated by the opportunity for career change, advancement, and increasing their income than potential graduate students.

Another factor that shows a varied level of importance is college attributes. Potential undergraduate students have a heightened sense of importance surrounding issues of location and the

What specific services should be provided to adult students has long been a topic of discussion at many institutions. While many service areas were identified as “very important” by both the potential undergraduate and graduate populations, potential undergraduate students indicated higher importance levels for services as depicted in figure 2.

An awareness of these nuanced differences between these two populations is of critical importance when marketing programs. Addressing the biggest questions and speaking to the motivational factors for each population can help you better target and attract the adult student population you are seeking.

MUST DO #2: PUSH THE PERSONAL ENRICHMENT BUTTON

Most adults will tell you that they are interested in returning to college “someday” but when that day will actually arrive is a bit of a mystery. A member of an organization to which I belong recently commented about the recruitment process for adults, noting, “It can take 19 minutes or nine years”—and she is right. The key to successfully enrolling adult students lies in converting those “someday” students into enrolled students, and a big part of that is what component of your marketing motivates them.

Motivations for Pursuing Additional Education

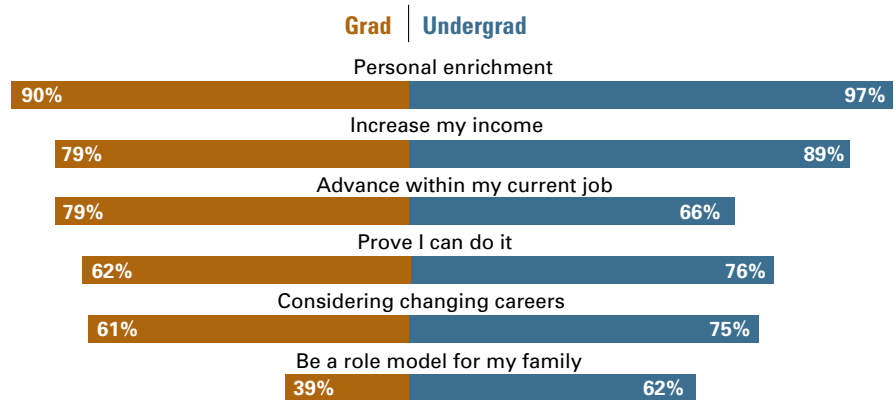


figure 1

availability of online courses, whereas potential graduate students are placing a higher level of importance on the quality of the faculty and the academic reputation of the institution.

The *Adult StudentsTALK™* research tells us that the number one motivation for furthering students’ education (97 percent of undergraduate students and 90 percent of graduate students) is personal enrichment. At the end of the day, when all other influences have been stripped away,

bettering themselves is the overwhelming motivation for students to return to school.

This powerful knowledge can be strategically woven into multiple facets of the recruitment process when working with adults at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Marketing messages should address the issue of bettering oneself and wanting to expand knowledge.

Reaching out to potential adult students and tapping into their desire to better themselves (and their families) is a strategy to utilize in moving adults along in their decision-making process. Messaging must be emotional, and not merely logical, if it is to have impact with adults. If you have not evaluated your marketing strategy for adult students recently, this may be one way of discovering if your marketing messages are resonating with your target

**Adult Services to Consider
(Percent “much more interested” if colleges offered)**

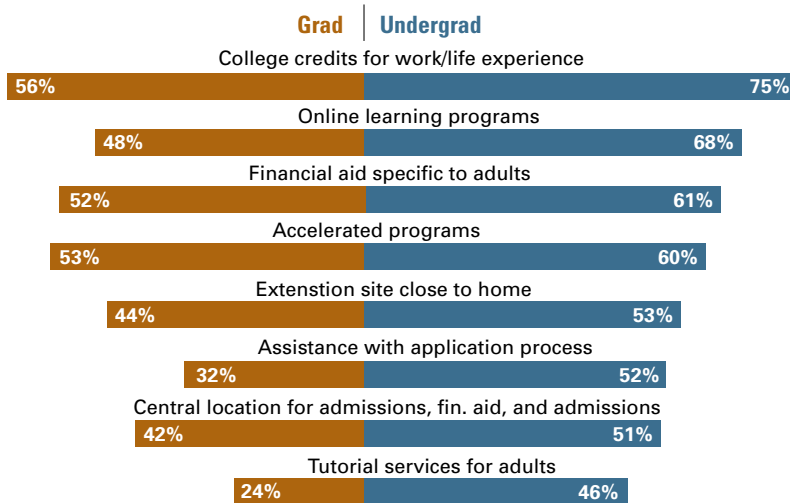


figure 2

Student testimonials should not be afraid to draw on the personal sense of accomplishment and growth that adult students value. Admissions and advising staff should also be aware of the level of importance this has in motivating students to not only enroll but to *complete* their education.

A qualitative research study I completed a few years ago directly addressed the issue of motivation among prospective adult students. In particular, I remember the passion and determination with which these adults spoke as they described an intrinsic need to complete their degrees. One woman specifically talked about sitting at work meetings and never feeling equal to those around her because she had never finished her undergraduate degree. She believed this feeling was self-inflicted, but it was without a doubt a powerful motivational factor for her in her decision to return to school.

population. Once enrolled, the idea of personal enrichment also has a place in your institutional retention strategies as well.

**MUST DO #3:
EVALUATE YOUR INSTITUTION'S FLEXIBILITY**

Both potential adult undergraduate and graduate students rated the flexibility of class scheduling as the most important attribute of a program. The concerns adult students have with regard to juggling time between work, family, and school are significant, and this level of concern is only heightened for students with children or caregiver responsibilities. Bearing this in mind, many institutions would be well served to revisit their course structures and schedules.

The need for daytime adult student programs is not high at either the undergraduate or graduate level. But perhaps most interesting, is the level of interest in online classes and how that seems to

Online programming

Thinking about offering online courses for adults? Consider the following:

- Undergraduate degree seekers are more open to classes entirely online. 66% say online courses are very appealing
- Comparatively, only 43% of graduate degree seekers find online courses very appealing with another 21% saying they are unappealing

Long weekdays or lost Saturdays?

When trying to fit education in with full-time employment, it appears students prefer night time courses to weekend courses:

- Approximately 50% find night time courses “very appealing” while only 32% find weekend courses “very appealing”

If given the choice, the majority of adults would opt for longer weekdays as opposed to losing a weekend day to pursue their education.

become less important to those individuals who are contemplating a graduate degree program.

Beyond simply offering courses at the desired times, a true test of an institution's flexibility is how easily students can move between the various course structures and schedules. Having night-time courses is clearly a strong place to begin, but what if during the summer one of your students coaches her son's little league baseball team on the one night per week her course meets? Is that same class available to her online or in some other delivery format? Are classes offered on the same night each week? Although great for planning, what happens when a student has an important conflict on that day for an entire semester or term?



Institutions that have always catered to traditional-age students expect the student to adjust to their schedule in order to meet the class time requirements. Conversely, adults, when faced with similar conflicts, will expect the institution to offer a schedule that works for them. Institutions that elect not to be flexible may find themselves struggling to enroll and retain adult students. The best way to discover if your delivery system is meeting the needs of the adult student market is to ask them. The best holders of this information are the adult students who didn't choose your institution—find out their reasons for not picking you with a nonmatriculant research study.

**MUST DO #4:
REVISIT YOUR POLICY ON CREDIT
FOR LIFE EXPERIENCE**

Of the six “must dos,” this one is likely the most problematic. However, it is also one of the most essential. For many colleges and universities this may be a can of worms that is somewhat frightening to even consider opening, but there is a strong reason it has made the “Must Do” list.

Our research revealed that the issue of “life experience credit” is a significant factor in the college-selection process. For those potential

students who were likely to return for a bachelor's degree, 75 percent reported that they were much more interested in institutions that provided credit for their life experience. At the graduate level, this percentage slips to 56 percent, but is still a factor.

Based upon my years of higher education experience, I fully understand the problematic issues surrounding this suggestion, yet I am of the opinion that it is critical for institutions to carefully review and perhaps expand their life experience credit policy. If they do not, they will lose a competitive advantage. For those who do not have a policy in place, perhaps this is the opportune time to develop an attractive and effective policy.

As you begin this process, I encourage you to keep a few things in mind: Simply having a policy at your institution that awards life experience credit is only a starting place. If this policy has been successfully navigated by only three tenacious students in the last five years, then I suspect the policy exists more as a barrier than a true recruitment tool. This is not to be interpreted as a suggestion for an overly liberal policy that simply awards credit for having turned a certain age or maintained a job for the last 15 years, but rather promotes a well-reasoned and well-documented historical evaluation of bona fide experience. An excellent place to start in this process is with your competition. Learn what you can about their policies on life experience credit—it will provide immediate insight as to where you stand in the competitive landscape.

I also suggest a policy with a clear set of procedures that allows adult students to work collaboratively with their advisor or a faculty member to construct a document that appropriately outlines the experience they bring to the academic table. If the process is clear and the submission is evaluated by a committee—which would review the documentation and then award credit based on a set of institutional expectations—I believe this can actually be a tool that institutions will find extremely beneficial.

As each student is evaluated by a “life credit” committee, the school will be provided with a unique peek into the lives of the students they are attracting. For example, if a remarkable student is identified, should they be utilized in a marketing campaign? Or is a student working for an employer that the institution has been trying to develop a partnership with for several years? Opportunities walk in the door constantly with adult students, but many of them slip back out the door without ever having been noticed.

MUST DO #5: CRITICALLY ANALYZE ADULT STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

Concerns and misunderstandings about financial aid are two of the biggest hurdles that adult students face. Consider a 30-something-year-old woman with a “good job” married to a 30-something man with an equally good job and two kids ages 12 and 14. The thought of taking out another loan for her to return to school is frightening. This family already has a home loan, two car loans, and school loans to re-pay. They will not be eligible for grants because their Expected Family Contribution on their FAFSA form is too high. If this adult is not able to maintain part-time enrollment status they will not even be eligible for a federal student loan.

Consider this: If she is able to attend part-time, borrow the money that is needed to attend, and manages to graduate by the time she is 40 years old (depending on the amount borrowed) this couple gets to look forward to having their education loans paid off sometime close to when they become eligible for social security.

Of adults surveyed by Stamats, 63 percent of those needing to complete their undergraduate and 68 percent of those needing to complete their graduate degrees were anticipating attending only part-time. Our *Adult Students TALK™* research also tells us that the cost of higher education lands in the top three factors when considering attending an institution for both undergraduate and graduate students. With the universal rising costs of tuition a number of adult students who would like the opportunity to return to college are finding it simply unmanageable. As one potential adult student from the survey stated so clearly, “The cost is not manageable anymore at public or private universities. Even with an upper middle class income, daily household expenses, medical insurance, and

retirement planning inhibit the ability to fund (higher education). Scholarships are just not available for adults student in the middle class.”

Many institutions fall into the trap of thinking that they will need to provide huge scholarships to adults, and since this is not always possible, they simply do nothing. Evaluating financial aid from an adult student perspective is an excellent way to measure where your institution stands and gain valuable suggestions regarding opportunities for improvement. In reality, simply making the effort is a gesture that is appreciated by the adult student population and may be interpreted as that “good omen” of support and encouragement that may speed their enrollment. Institutions that are committed to serving adult students need to develop financial resources that promote both their understanding of the issues facing adult students as well as their willingness to be part of the solution.

MUST DO #6: RECOGNIZE THE POWER OF YOUR WEB SITE

We live in a world that is increasingly dependent on technology. There are many of us who don’t make a significant purchase without first seeking better information on the Web. Today’s adult students are also very comfortable using technology. Some 96 percent of potential adult undergraduate students and 97 percent of potential adult graduate students begin gathering information about attending your college or university on your institution’s Web site.

In the last six months, I have spent time viewing hundreds of college Web sites, nearly always looking for, or trying to learn about, adult student programs offered at these institutions. All in all, most schools do a great job using the Web to reach adult graduate students. However, locating information about adult student degree completion programs left me frustrated about where they were buried on many colleges and university Web sites. All too often, there was no indication on the home page that they even had an adult student program. I typically had to click my way through several guesses as to where information for adults would be located and, once I finally found it, I was even more frustrated. What I was able to locate was some nice verbiage about the institution’s program that was “designed to meet the needs of adult students.” It was also fairly standard to find commentary about when the courses were offered,

Clarify Your Web Strategy

As you think about developing a comprehensive Web strategy, begin by using a basic asset allocation model to explore how your Web initiatives fit into the other marketing investments you have made.

Ask yourself:

- Are all our individual marketing investments made with a larger, institution-wide marketing strategy in mind?
- Do we have a clear integrated marketing communication plan?

Now that you have established the larger view, focus on your Web site and ask yourself:

- Are we utilizing our Web site as an effective marketing tool?
- How much do we spend on average for our Web site?
- Are we driving people to the right places on our Web site to encourage action?
- How can we monitor whether or not our Web investment is paying off?

If you invest significant dollars in your Web tactics on a hit-or-miss or periodic basis without a clear strategy, you will likely overspend. A better approach is to budget regular amounts for continual improvement.

Until you sort through the answers to these questions, don’t spend a dime on your Web. Find someone on your campus or hire a qualified consultant to help you gain some altitude on the problem. Zoom up to 32,000 feet and undertake a marketing audit, or at least a Web site audit, so that you can develop a Web plan that is nestled appropriately in your larger integrated marketing communication plan.

and perhaps if I was lucky, a number to call if I was interested in finding out more.

On the other hand, there were a few extremely informative Web sites that have depicted very well how the institution serves adult students. I applaud those institutions that have already embraced the Web site to serve as one of your strongest marketing and recruitment tools.

In an effort to demonstrate my point, may I suggest a simple test? Log on to your institution's Web site and locate a few basic pieces of information that potential adult students have told us are important to them. From your institution's adult student programs page, see how easily you can locate:

- Course schedules for adult programs (this should include various course delivery options)
- Costs to attend
- Information about the faculty who will be teaching in the adult student program

If you struggled to find this information, or needed to click more than one page away from the adult student program page, you have just experienced the unnecessary barrier that potential adult students face when they come to your site looking for information. You may want to consider having an audit done of your site. This audit should be done from an adult student prospective, as we know adults think differently about the Web than teens and college administrators. Adults looking on your site want facts. If they are unable to find the facts, they will go to another institution's Web site, and you will have just lost the opportunity to introduce your institution to them. Ramping up your Web site with clean navigation and informational links is a "must do" and will serve you well as a strong marketing tool.

CONCLUSION

At colleges and universities all across the country there are millions of adults who are striving to succeed in institutional settings that were not developed with them in mind. Despite the obstacles they face, we frequently hear the satisfaction that they have with their decision to return for further education through their words; "everyone should consider [returning to school]," "going back to school is the best thing I have ever done for myself," and most simply, "you can't beat it."

As you continue the process of evaluating your adult student programs, keep in mind some of the key areas addressed within this *White Paper*. Each of these "must dos" have the ability to provide points of differentiation which can be brought out through your marketing efforts. Adult students play a vital role in the success and vitality of colleges and universities. Marketing to them and strategically addressing what is most relevant to them, is a critical step in bringing these students to your door. The sooner these concepts are embraced at your institution through discussions, attitude, and resources, the sooner you will begin to maximize the benefits of recruiting and serving this population.

REFERENCES

- Harms, B. 2007. *Driven to Succeed: Caucasian Female Nontraditional College Graduates Explore Characteristics That Helped Them Overcome Barriers*, Ph.D. dissertation
- Stokes, P. (2006). "Hidden in Plain Sight: Adult Learners Forge a New Tradition in Higher Education." Retrieved on September 15, 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/stokes.pdf>.

INDUSTRY-LEADING RESOURCES

As the nation's leading integrated marketing firm for higher education institutions, Stamats offers our clients—and the larger education community—the most comprehensive, innovative resources. From *White Papers* to interactive scorecards, newsletters to a tagline repository, you're sure to find insightful and relevant tools just a click away at www.stamats.com/resources.

White Papers: Each year, we publish a number of *White Papers* focused on marketing strategy, insights, and ideas designed for the senior leadership team. Our most recent *White Papers* include:

Building the Senior Team: Making the Right Choices

The most important responsibility of today's college or university president is to build an effective senior team.

An Interview with Don Schultz

Don Schultz discusses the role and function of integrated marketing communication in higher education.

Trout on Strategy: Differentiation in Higher Education

When a prospective student or donor visits your campus and asks, "What makes your institution different," how do you respond?

Is Image Still Everything?

Prospective students won't enroll and potential donors won't give if they've never heard of your institution.

Leading the Charge

The qualities required of today's exceptional leader.

A President's Primer on Developing an Effective Web Strategy

Ten things you need to understand before you spend another dime on your Web site.

Marketing Scorecards: Use this preliminary self-assessment tool to help evaluate your integrated marketing strategy, knowledge of traditional-age students, and recruitment search efforts.

QuickTakes e-newsletter: Gain timely insight and actionable information with this twice-monthly electronic newsletter.

Tagline repository: A service to our clients and friends who have taglines and want to lay claim to them, are looking for taglines and want to see if one they are interested in is already chosen, or are simply fascinated by our fascination with taglines.

Webinars and conferences: Stay up-to-date on the latest trends, insights, and technology that is generating results and keep your finger on the pulse of your target audiences with Stamats' higher education seminars (both live and on the Web). Visit www.stamats.com/events for more information.

www.stamats.com/resources

ABOUT STAMATS, INC.

Stamats, Inc. is the nation's premier provider of integrated marketing solutions for higher education institutions. Our legacy of integrated, collaborative work includes publications, research, brand marketing, direct marketing, interactive media, planning, consulting, and advertising. Every year, more than 100 colleges and universities trust the team of integrated marketing professionals at Stamats to help them identify, communicate, and keep their institution's brand promises.



STAMATS

Promises kept.

615 Fifth Street SE P.O. Box 1888
Cedar Rapids, IA 52406-1888
319.364.6167
toll free: 800.553.8878
fax: 319.365.5421
www.stamats.com