EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Do prospective students, especially those entering college after years away from the classroom, know how to find institutions that best serve their needs?

What are adult prospective students’ expectations and priorities as they decide what to study and where to enroll?

What kinds of information are they getting, and what can be done to help this group of Americans make wiser decisions about their education?

This research report examines the expectations, attitudes and needs of adults who are thinking about earning postsecondary credentials after having spent some or in most cases many years in the workforce. Most of these prospective students hope a certificate or degree will advance their chances in the labor market, but they are greatly worried about the costs of college and their ability to balance school with the demands of work and family. They are particularly attracted to schools that offer practical programs and hands-on support from caring and knowledgeable teachers and advisers.

This research also reveals that many adult prospective students don’t consider important information about the quality of different colleges and programs in their decisions. Many existing supports for helping prospective students are not reaching these adults. The report thus concludes with concrete ideas and considerations for how leaders in higher education, government and philanthropy can help adult prospective students make wise choices about their higher education.

Public Agenda conducted this research with support from The Kresge Foundation. Data for this study were collected through a nationally representative survey of 803 adults (18 to 55 years old) without college degrees who are considering enrolling in a postsecondary program to earn a college credential (adult prospective students). These interviews were conducted via telephone, including cell phones, and online, in the spring of 2013. In addition, Public Agenda conducted a total of eight focus groups with adult prospective students for this research, including four Learning Curve Research focus groups, which are deliberative focus group discussions with follow-up interviews.
These are the main findings from this research:

**Finding 1.**
**Driving concerns: Can I afford it, and can I make it work in my busy life?**

Adults who don’t have degrees and are considering enrolling in a postsecondary program are most concerned about taking on debt and about their ability to balance school with work and family obligations. Many also worry whether they will be able to keep up academically. But relatively few are anxious about dropping out or fitting in with other students.

**Finding 2.**
**Top priorities: High-quality teachers, applicable skills, affordable tuition.**

These prospective students’ main priorities are to gain knowledge and skills that will be directly relevant to the workplace and to do so at an affordable price and under the guidance of caring and qualified teachers. They are particularly attracted to schools that offer job placement, real-world experience and hands-on help with financial aid applications.

**Finding 3.**
**Older and younger adult prospective students exhibit some different needs and concerns.**

Older adults (25 and above) are more doubtful about the idea of going to school, and they are less likely to have concrete plans. At the same time, younger adults who are considering college (18 to 24 years of age) are more worried about their ability to succeed at college and land a job.

**Finding 4.**
**Most adults considering going to college expect to take remedial courses.**

Many Americans in this group sense that they may not be well prepared for college work. Nearly 6 in 10 think it is likely that they will have to take a remedial class in college.

**Finding 5.**
**Most hope to take at least some classes online.**

Notwithstanding their desire for caring teachers and hands-on learning, most adult prospective students—especially older ones—want to take at least some classes online, with 1 in 4 looking to complete most or all of their degree online. But many suspect (and rightly so) that employers don’t value online education as highly as in-person instruction.
Finding 6.
They learn about colleges from people they know, advertising and the websites of specific schools. Few speak to college counselors or access online tools designed to compare schools.

These adults’ most common sources of information on college are friends, family and colleagues, as well as TV commercials and billboard ads. Those further along in their college planning are also likely to access specific schools’ websites. Only a minority seek advice from college counselors. Even fewer use interactive websites designed to help students compare colleges and better understand their options—but those who have used these sites value them.

Finding 7.
Many don’t think school performance metrics that experts place stock in—such as graduation rates and average student debt—are essential pieces of information to have before enrolling at a school.

Despite being confident that they can find the advice and information they need to make good decisions, most prospective students lack what many experts and policymakers consider to be key pieces of information about colleges. Moreover, not even half feel it is essential to find out a school’s graduation rate before enrolling. Learning about the types of jobs graduates from a particular school typically get isn’t a top priority for many adults either.

Finding 8.
Few adult prospective students distinguish between not-for-profit and for-profit colleges, but once they understand the distinction, they become more skeptical of for-profit schools.

More than half of adult prospective students do not recognize the term “for-profit college.” But when focus group participants learned more about what differentiates for-profit and not-for-profit schools—particularly in the way they are funded and governed—many became less trustful of for-profits. Some said this information would lead them to ask tougher questions about programs they were thinking of entering.

Finding 9.
Many believe that more opportunities to meet and talk with college experts and other adult students, in person or online, could help adults like them make better decisions.

What would help adult prospective students better navigate their college searches? Respondents were most enthusiastic about initiatives that would bring adult prospective students into direct contact with trusted college experts, through in-person workshops in the community and online forums. They were also attracted to the idea of comparing notes with their peers. And although few currently use websites designed to help students understand their options, many imagined such sites could help prospective students like them a great deal.
Ideas and considerations for helping adult prospective students make wise decisions about their education

As leaders in higher education, government and philanthropy are pushing to increase the number of Americans with postsecondary credentials, our research demonstrates that much more can be done to help adult prospective students understand their options and figure out which kind of postsecondary education best fits their needs. Here, in brief, are ideas and considerations emerging from this research; some of them are broad, others are specific and even technical:

Start by engaging adult prospective students on their greatest concerns and priorities. The considerations that these prospective students care about most are job preparation, affordability, access to qualified and supportive teachers and balancing school with work and family responsibilities. Education leaders should open any approach to engage or reach adult prospective students by providing information or advice about these top concerns.

Present school performance data in ways that are meaningful and engaging to prospective students, and help them understand why the numbers can be useful to them. Many adults who are considering college do not immediately perceive graduation, dropout and loan default rates as useful to them. It takes time and discussion for prospective students to understand why data can help them make good decisions.

Web-based college search tools that give students comprehensive information about schools should appear early in web searches—and should be accessible in mobile phone web browsers and apps. Free websites that offer prospective students tailored guidance in their college search and are designed to compare various school performance metrics hardly make it into the ten top Google searches on colleges, and they do not take into account that increasing numbers of adults access the Internet primarily on their phones.

Help adult prospective students understand the differences between for-profit and not-for-profit schools. Most adults considering college are not aware of this distinction. But when they learn how different types of schools are funded and organized, and in particular that some schools are for-profit enterprises, the distinction matters to them.

Consider trying to level the playing field for marketing to adult prospective students. To ensure Americans access information that will allow them to understand the full range of higher education options, more marketing of unbiased information and better outreach by not-for-profit institutions might be necessary. Are there smart ways for public schools to invest their limited budgets more effectively in marketing and advertisements?

Create more opportunities for adult prospective students to meet and talk with advisers who do not have institutional agendas, in person or online. Many adult prospective students value the chance to learn from knowledgeable advisers and college experts, both in person or online. They especially want to meet with individuals who they feel have their best interests at heart and who are not pushing them to enroll in any particular school.

Efforts to reach adults who are considering college must be tailored to different age groups, employment status and other demographic factors and life circumstances. Adult prospective students are not all the same. For example, we found older adult prospective students are less certain they will go back to school at all. They may benefit specifically from initiatives that are geared toward helping them become better informed about their options for a postsecondary education. Younger adults worry more about their ability to get through school and find a job afterward. They may need more help assessing their academic capabilities and identifying the most suitable types of support in order to succeed.