IDEAS AND CONSIDERATIONS
for Helping Adult Prospective Students Make Wise Decisions About Their Education
Toward better engagement with adult prospective students

Students’ likelihood of completing college and succeeding in the labor market is significantly tied to their choice of institution and program of study. As education leaders push 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.

Few adult prospective students are unreservedly excited about the prospect of going to school, our research suggests. Many worry about taking on too much debt and about how to combine school with their family and work responsibilities. Younger adults in particular worry that they won’t succeed academically. Moreover, many of these prospective students wonder—and even doubt—whether the money, time and effort they will spend on earning a credential will pay off in the labor market.

This research also shows that despite great confidence in their ability to get the advice and information they need, many adult prospective students lack key information about higher education institutions and about the sources of information that could help them make sound decisions. Universities and colleges, government agencies and foundations have made significant efforts to publicize school performance metrics and to sponsor interactive websites where students can get objective, customized advice on their college options. But our research suggests that these efforts are not reaching the students who could make good use of them.

Now we turn to a number of ways that leaders in higher education, government and philanthropy can help adult prospective students make wise choices about their higher education. Some of them are broad considerations, other are specific and even technical ideas:

- **Start by engaging adult prospective students on their greatest concerns and priorities:** This research clearly highlights what adults are most interested in as they consider pursuing a postsecondary credential. Whether online or in person, through support services or marketing, higher education institutions and other leaders seeking the attention of this group of prospective students need to provide information and advice on the following questions:

  **Will this prepare me for a better job?**
  The majority of adult prospective students are looking primarily to gain knowledge and skills that are directly applicable in the workplace. These adults want to know that a specific postsecondary credential will help them advance in their careers or find a job. Moreover, it is important that these prospective students understand that certificates and degrees vary in the extent to which they improve graduates’ chances of getting better jobs and earning more money. The challenge for higher education leaders, of course, is to provide this information in a personalized and relatable way. Adult prospective students don’t necessarily find average graduate employment statistics particularly helpful in their college searches (see next recommendation on presenting performance data).
How much will it cost, and can I afford it?

Adult prospective students want honest and helpful conversations about how to finance college and how to evaluate the cost of getting a degree against their future earning potential. To retain students’ trust, higher education institutions and leaders need to tread a fine line between helping students see that they can find a way to afford school and appearing to be pushing them further into debt.

Are there qualified teachers who will help me if I need it?

Prospective students not only care about getting a practical degree at an affordable price, but also want to meet caring, well-trained and experienced advisers and teachers. Higher education institutions and leaders need to assure adult prospective students that they are not “just a number,” but that qualified professionals care about their success. At the same time, prospective students need more information and advice on how to evaluate the quality of teachers and support services across different schools.

How can I balance school with my work and family responsibilities?

It is clear that higher education institutions need to offer adults flexibility in the ways they can take classes and progress in their degrees. But adults considering college may also benefit from targeted conversations and advice about how much they should expect school to take time and energy away from their family and work, how to best balance these competing demands and how to solve school–family and school–work conflicts when they arise.

- 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. Adult prospective students do not automatically care about data that experts consider crucial for making good choices about college, even when the information seems to address issues they are most concerned about. We found that it takes time and discussion for people to understand why statistics can help them make good decisions.

For instance, many adults who are considering college do not immediately perceive graduation, dropout and loan default rates as useful to them. And these statistics are easily misunderstood. Focus group participants did not necessarily see a connection between the quality of a school and these statistics; they often assumed that such statistics reflected on the students, not on the school. Many were unsure how an aggregate statistic related to their individual situation. And even though the vast majority of adult prospective students seek a postsecondary credential in order to improve their job prospects, we found that less than half thought it was essential to know about alumni jobs and salaries before enrolling at a school.

Focus group participants did, however, come to find these statistics useful after they had an opportunity to discuss them and ask questions. They found these data most meaningful when they were presented in ways that let them easily compare different schools. They were more interested in graduation rates and tuition costs than in dropout and loan default rates—perhaps because they perceived the former to be more relevant to their own lives than the latter.

Moreover, participants frequently asked whether the data could be broken down by degree program and type of student. And some suggested that personal stories and testimonials should be linked to the data to make the numbers more relatable.
• **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.** A number of free websites offer prospective students tailored guidance in their college search and are designed to compare various school performance metrics (for example, Campus Explorer, BigFuture and the White House College Scorecard). At this point, however, these sites hardly make it into the top Google searches that include words such as “college,” “program” or “degree.” Instead, prospective students’ Google searches lead them directly to for-profit colleges’ websites.

Moreover, these comprehensive, interactive tools do not take into account the increasing number of adults—especially non-college-educated young adults—who access the Internet primarily on their phones. Mobile browser and app versions of these sites must be developed. And of course, each new tool needs to be tested carefully in terms of its design, content and intended audience.

• **Help adult prospective students understand the differences between for-profit and not-for-profit schools.** Our research shows that 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. Many focus group participants expressed skepticism of the motives and claims of for-profit schools and said that knowing the difference would help them evaluate their options more carefully.

• **Consider leveling the playing field for marketing to adult prospective students.** This research shows that the vast majority of adult prospective students learn about colleges from TV and Internet ads, billboards and other types of commercials. Far fewer speak to guidance counselors or financial aid advisers—or, as noted earlier, use websites that compare colleges with one another.

Currently, for-profit education institutions dominate the high education advertisement sphere, therefore dominating the information that adult prospective students receive. For example, focus group participants were frequently unaware that community colleges and state universities, not just for-profit universities, offer online courses and degree programs. Virtually no focus group participants had come across objective, interactive college search tools when they used the Internet for information, but nearly all had been on sites that asked them for their contact information and received calls from for-profit recruiters.

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. Should there be an effort to level the playing field for not-for-profits to be able to get their messages to prospective students? Are there smart ways for public schools to invest their limited budgets more effectively in marketing and advertisements?

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Create more opportunities for adult prospective students to meet and talk with advisers who do not have institutional agendas, in person or online. Our research shows that many adult prospective students value the chance to learn from knowledgeable advisers and college experts, 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.

Focus group participants also said they appreciated opportunities, including in the focus groups themselves, to meet with other students, hear about their college searches and compare notes. Many said the discussion motivated them to become more focused on going to school. Community and workplace-based workshops could include meetings among adult prospective students, and between prospective students and recent adult graduates, where the latter can share their experiences and give advice.

Efforts to reach adults who are considering college must be tailored to different age groups, employment status and other demographic factors and life circumstances. Finally, it is important to remember that adult prospective students are not all the same. For example, we found that 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 supports in order to succeed. Efforts to communicate with, advise and inform prospective students must be sensitive to these and other differences in adults’ concerns and lives.

At the moment, however, there are very few resources designed specifically for adult prospective students, let alone to meet the needs of varying types of adults. Some previous efforts, such as the College Choices for Adults website, developed by the Transparency by Design initiative, received few visits and had to be shut down. It is crucial that any future efforts to support the increasing number of adults who are trying to figure out whether college may be worth it for them are thoughtfully designed and broadly advertised to reach the many Americans who could benefit from them.