

# Does your admissions team know how adult learners approach their college search?

EAB research points to how adult student prospects are gathering information about programs and what their key decision criteria are, with admissions recruitment takeaways for colleges and universities.

By: [Melissa Ezarik](#) | May 20, 2019



*As more adults go back to school, admissions and marketing administrators must know their motivations and information-gathering habits.*

While most college leaders now realize the importance of adult student education in meeting enrollment and revenue goals, this population of potential students is complex. And with many adult learners starting as stealth applicants, administrators often don't have the opportunity to nurture contacts to encourage movement through the admissions funnel.

Through a recent survey of nearly 800 current and prospective students of graduate, undergraduate degree completion, online and certificate programs, education research firm EAB has provided an inside look at why adults are pursuing additional education, sources they use to gather information about programs, and how they decide where to apply.

This group is "very busy and extremely pragmatic," says Brittany Murchison, managing director of program marketing at EAB. Savvy navigators of the application process, adult learners approach it with purpose and focus, limiting the amount of time and number of steps involved. They seek a return on investment, and want upfront evidence of it. As digital consumers, they place a high value on a school's responsiveness.

## **Flexible options—and application process—required**

Adults who go back to school are typically facing a number of personal and professional obligations. Yet they may not come into their college search with a particular flexible program format in mind. "We've got data that says folks at the beginning of the journey don't even know what their options are," says Murchison. "As they move down the funnel, they may look at their exact need, like evenings and weekends, or online only."

Most adults wind up submitting just one or two applications—but as the EAB report notes, prospects may be considering and researching significantly more options. That reinforces the need for effective online marketing geared toward adults.

"Take a step back and put yourself in that perspective to communicate in a way that they will understand your programs," says Murchison. That advice applies to messaging about both the program content and format. Administrators should keep in mind that someone browsing for programs may see a variety of wording to describe online learning and need clarification about format.

As for the application process itself, more than half of the adults said they spent less than two hours on an application. About the same amount responded that being able to complete applications on a mobile device was at least somewhat important to them. In other words, they seek a quick, convenient application experience.

"Adult learners have high expectations as consumers," says Murchison. "When schools are thinking through the student journey and student experience, it's probably not to the level these folks are used to being marketed to."

## **Adult student recruitment strategy lessons**

The EAB report offers four major takeaways for colleges:

**1. Ensure that your marketing effectively articulates return on investment.** Costs and value really matter to adult learners as they decide whether, and where, to enroll. Tailor value and cost messaging to prospects' mindsets.

**2. Use data to better understand your prospects and tailor marketing to their intent.** The trend of adult learners having heightened expectations for the recruitment "customer experience" is expected to continue. Developing robust, data-driven prospect personas can help in understanding their motivations, interests and preferences at each stage of recruitment.

**3. Reach students early with awareness campaigns and multichannel marketing.** By the time adult student prospects take graduate admission tests, most have identified their top options. So schools must build awareness of programs early in the consideration process.

**4. Craft messaging that conveys school-life balance.** To appeal to adult learners with significant family or work commitments, messaging on flexible education options should address concerns about juggling school and life.

Download the white paper [here](#).

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