

Education Issue Brief

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From Outreach to Enrollment: Strategies to Engage Adults in Education Beyond High School



Almost all states across the country have established ambitious college completion goals for their population.¹ Most states' goals emphasize achieving specific target rates and types of post-high school credentials required to address their workforce needs and to improve people's ability to thrive in a changing economy. Adult learners, that is, students ages 25 to 64, play a key role in reaching these goals. However, engaging this population requires shifting the paradigm typically used to engage more traditional students.

Whereas students of traditional college age are typically connected to the higher education path through their high schools, adult learners are not linked to such a clear, easily identified set of institutions. "Traditional" students typically receive information about colleges from direct email campaigns, campus visits, college websites, guidance counselors, and school-hosted college fairs.²



In 2017, Lumina Foundation launched the Adult Promise Pilot program with grants to five states (Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Washington) to develop and test innovative programs to engage adult learners in higher education through improved outreach, financial supports, and other supportive services. The "promise" aspect of the program seeks to improve access to financial supports, as many adult learners have exhausted or are otherwise ineligible for traditional sources of aid. The foundation expanded its work by making grants to seven additional states in 2018 (California, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, and Oregon), and to three more in 2019 (Arizona, Rhode Island, and Texas). In its role as the Adult Promise evaluation and learning partner, Mathematica has conducted formative and summative studies of the program, focusing on the first two cohorts of grantee states.

In contrast, adult learners most often learn about colleges from friends or family, advertisements, and college websites. Adult learners also come—or in many cases, come back—to higher education with different goals, expectations, and experiences.³ To meet the challenge of successfully engaging adult learners in higher education, states and institutions need to attend to the different needs of adult learners and make it easier for them to pursue education beyond high school, starting with recruitment and continuing through enrollment and completion.

In this brief, we draw on data that Mathematica collected during a four-year evaluation of the Adult Promise program to describe how states and institutions are engaging adult learners through tailored marketing, outreach, and enrollment strategies. Data sources include telephone interviews with Adult Promise program leaders, a survey with partner institutions, site visits to three Adult Promise states, and a

document review of marketing and outreach materials for the 12 states participating in the evaluation.

This brief describes marketing, outreach and enrollment strategies tailored for adult learners in Adult Promise states. Of the institutions surveyed for the evaluation, 80 percent indicated that they tailor their marketing and outreach specifically for adult learners. And according to state and institution leaders, prospective adult learners needed at least 15 to 30 “touches” or contacts before enrolling. This brief focuses on three specific strategies that states and institutions use to *reach* adult learners through marketing and outreach and then to *engage and enroll* adult learners: (1) using tailored messaging, (2) implementing tech-based tools, and (3) providing high-touch helpers. Some strategies cut across both the marketing and outreach and engagement and enrollment phases (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Overview of adult-oriented marketing, outreach, and enrollment strategies

Strategy	Approach	What is it?	Phases	
			Marketing and outreach	Engagement and enrollment
 Tailored messages	Listening sessions with adult learners	Conducting focus groups and other meetings to understand adult learners' unique needs and learn what messages resonate with them	✓	✓
	Branding the initiative	Choosing a specific name and corresponding slogans or imagery targeted at adult learners	✓	
	Adult-specific messaging	Using language tailored to the experience and needs of adult learners (for example, offering flexible course offerings and connections to wraparound supports such as child care)	✓	✓
 Tech-based tools	Comprehensive web portals	Developing web portals that provide prospective students with all the resources they may need in one easily accessible location	✓	✓
	Digital marketing toolkits	Developing a packet of digital materials (for example, text, hashtags, short URLs, imagery) for use on various online platforms	✓	
 High-touch helpers	Navigator and ambassador programs	Providing high-touch support through trained state- or institution-level staff or respected community members	✓	✓
	Family engagement and recruitment nights	Offering family-friendly events for adult learners to engage or reengage with higher education	✓	✓



Strategy 1: Tailored messages

Using appropriate messaging is critical when engaging adult learners. Whereas traditional students may value leaving home to attend school and get the “college experience,” adult learners often have different priorities. States and institutions need to focus on what matters to them. Adult Promise states identified several messages they tested and believed resonated with the adult learners they were trying to reach. The development of most messaging began by including the voices of the adult learners themselves.

“Traditional-age students are focused on dorms and sports. [Adults] have an entirely different access point into the institution.”

—Program leader

Focus groups helped states better understand adult learners. Through activities such as focus groups, listening sessions, and surveys, Adult Promise states engaged adult learners directly in the development of strategies to connect with and engage them. For example, Oregon relied on focus groups to understand opportunities for enrollment—whether institutional, financial, personal, familial, or cultural—which led to a marketing toolkit for use across the state. California tested various messages for adult learners, including current and potential enrollees, to determine which resonated most with intended audiences. Some states prioritized seeking input from adult learners of color. Both Oregon and California explicitly included adult learners of color in their focus groups. Similarly, Oklahoma hosted a conference for Adult Promise navigators, featuring a panel of adult learners from diverse backgrounds who provided feedback on the navigators’ work. States used such feedback to further tailor their messaging and engagement processes to attract adult learners of color.



A focus on messaging

States typically used the Adult Promise initiative to directly engage and enroll adult learners, but California took a different approach. Working through the Foundation for California Community Colleges, that state used the Adult Promise grant to conduct research to identify best practices and develop recommendations for the system’s Chancellor’s Office and colleges, with a particular eye toward raising awareness of adult learners and closing equity gaps. Toward this end, they conducted a landscape analysis of relevant policies and practices, held focus groups with current and prospective adult students, and convened a strategic workshop for the California Community Colleges. Through these efforts, they suggested policy and practice changes and identified best practices for marketing and outreach to adult learners, which align with the strategies described in this brief. For example, they recommend using realistic images of adult students in marketing materials, using messaging that highlights the potential for career advancement and a better future, and using a multi-pronged approach, with both digital and traditional advertising, to reach adult learners.

States branded their Adult Promise initiatives to address adult learners’ unique experiences. States used slogans that were short, catchy, uplifting, and targeted specifically to the concerns of adult learners. For example, recognizing that adult learners often come with prior knowledge and experience from work or previous college education, Reach Higher Oklahoma branded one of its initiatives as “Show What you Know.” Ohio tried to appeal to the future benefits of returning to higher education for additional credentials with the slogan, “Finish for Your Future.” Hawaii and Indiana both used slogans that focused on adult learners who left higher education at some point and are considering returning.

Exhibit 2. State-level branded initiatives linked to Adult Promise



*California's work was exploratory so they do not yet have a logo.

Hitting the right note

Some states learned valuable lessons about tailoring messaging to empower adults and convey support. Indiana, for instance, initially used the slogan “Finish What You Started” but found this branding put too much of the burden to return and succeed on adult learners who had previously stopped out. The grantee pivoted to a more empowering message and rebranded to “You Can. Go Back.” Similarly, one North Carolina program leader noted, “It can hurt your work with adult learners to say we want you back, as opposed to saying we failed you, we want to do better, we want to figure out what success means to you and what to do to help you succeed.”



When is a promise a promise?

No states branded their Lumina-funded Adult Promise program as a “promise” scholarship, per se. Such branding implies guaranteed financial support. Instead, the initiatives focused on returning, completing, or moving to the next level of education. States deemphasized language around “promise” because in some states public funding was not guaranteed and they did not want to mislead prospective learners if funding changed over time or they were ineligible.

States branded their Adult Promise initiatives to address adult learners’ unique experiences. States used slogans that were short, catchy, uplifting, and targeted specifically to the concerns of adult learners. For example, recognizing that adult learners often come with prior knowledge and experience from work or previous college education, Reach Higher Oklahoma branded one of its initiatives as “Show What you Know.” Ohio tried to appeal to the future benefits of returning to higher education for additional credentials with the slogan, “Finish for Your Future.” Hawaii and Indiana both used slogans that focused on adult learners who left higher education at some point and are considering returning.

Adult-specific messaging helped states engage adult learners. Adult learners seek higher education for many reasons and bring varied background and experiences with them. Marketing messages should recognize their unique circumstances. Adult Promise states found success in messaging that highlighted long-term career benefits and, importantly, addressed concerns adult learners may have about pursuing further education. States used a variety of messages in their marketing materials to emphasize these points (Exhibit 3, next page).



Strategy 2: Tech-based tools

States developed a variety of tech-based tools to help engage prospective adult learners and make enrollment convenient and efficient for them, as this population is often balancing work and family demands with education. Several states created online portals and other tools to help with the enrollment process. Others invested in marketing toolkits featuring digital products to establish consistent messaging to reach a wider audience. Although technology is a promising approach to reaching adult learners and keeping them engaged, states and institutions recognized that not all adult learners have access to or comfort with it. As such, technology was often one component of a multi-pronged approach.

Comprehensive web portals streamlined the enrollment process. Several Adult Promise states developed extensive web portals in which prospective students could easily access many needed resources in one location. Recognizing that most adult learners are busy and do not have time for complex or lengthy application and enrollment processes—and that they bring prior experience, sometimes including college credits—it is important to help potential students optimize the work they have already done. The websites states developed often served as virtual “navigators” that guide students through the process of identifying programs, enrollment, financial aid, and earning credits for prior learning.

Exhibit 3. Adult-specific messaging

Earning potential and increased career options

Now, more than ever, finishing your education is key to earning a living wage in Washington's high-skill economy.

Washington

What's the main motivating factor behind your desire to explore earning your degree or certificate? Family? New job? Better options? We love hearing from you so we know how we can best help!

Idaho

Looking for new career options?

Maine

Long and non-linear educational pathways

It's in your hands. Everything you wanted to achieve, it's still possible. Come back to UH. Finish what you started and get your degree.

Hawaii

It's never too late to finish what you started and begin a new chapter in your life.

Oklahoma

Juggling responsibilities

Yes, you can be a parent or guardian and a student; college and your training can fit into your life and your schedule.

Oregon

Family-centered approaches

College is more than just a degree. Your college experience helps you define who you want to be, what you want to do in the future, and how you can build a better life for you and your family.

Hawaii

You'll inspire your kids, your family, and your community when you pursue a degree or certificate. With college or training you can do more and be more for them, and for you.

Oregon

Financial assistance

Financial assistance can make your college affordable.

Oregon

You can get a degree. Tuition free.

Kentucky

Exhibit 4. Online tools created for adult learners



Hawaii

STAR: App that shows how far along students are in their program and how the credits they already earned can apply toward programs of interest in Hawaii’s high-demand workforce occupations



Idaho

Next Steps Idaho: Website that provides resources and assessments to identify potential career paths, programs, and financial assistance



Indiana

Next Level Jobs: Tool that guides learners and employers to identify free training programs in high-demand fields based on their location and career interests



North Carolina

Wake Tech’s Finish First: Tool that helps learners and advisors identify the best path to obtaining a credential



Oklahoma

Show What You Know: Tool that helps learners and advisors identify the best path to obtaining a credential



Washington

College and Career Compass: Online portal that provides information and resources for adult learners and a program matching feature based on past education, interest, and financial need

The web portals were especially helpful in states that developed credit for prior learning crosswalks as part of their Adult Promise work. The portals leverage online technology to dynamically provide individualized guidance for adult students based on prior relevant experiences and coursework. They also give learners standardized protocols for obtaining credits for prior learning.

Marketing toolkits ensured consistent adult-specific messaging across institutions in the state.

Adult learners often juggle many competing priorities and may need more frequent and varied outreach or encouragement to decide to pursue further education. Over half of Adult Promise institutions surveyed cited digital advertising as one of the most effective strategies at getting adult learners to enroll. All states engaged with targeted marketing approaches via technology, especially on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Spotify, Pandora, email, and others (see Exhibit 5, next page). To support this outreach, states developed their own marketing toolkits or hired external marketing agencies to develop materials on their behalf. Most often, these toolkits included digital materials for various platforms (Facebook, email, Twitter) that included hashtags, short URLs that directed people to their main websites, and engaging photos of older adults or parents with young families completing their degrees. States that provided these toolkits not only helped increase the frequency and consistency of outreach to adult learners, but also reduced burden on institutions by providing tested materials that could be quickly adopted.

New media isn’t always best

States acknowledged there are benefits to traditional marketing materials such as mailers, phone calls, radio ads, and billboards. Over one-third of Adult Promise institutions surveyed cited print, radio, and TV advertising as one of the most effective strategies at getting adult learners to enroll. Program leaders commented that, with the deluge of emails people receive, hard-copy materials can be more impactful. States that focused on reaching adult learners in rural areas particularly emphasized the importance of traditional materials.

Exhibit 5. Sample of adult-oriented marketing materials

Washington

Twitter



Facebook



Minnesota

Email



Spring Semester Starts January 11
CONTACT US TODAY

Kentucky

Spotify



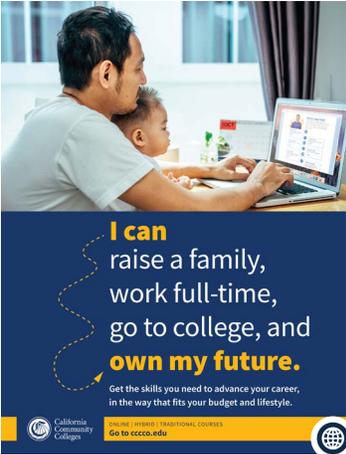
WORK READY
SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Learn More

Fueled by the Kentucky Lottery

California

Website



California Community Colleges
Go to cocco.edu

Maine

Website



Banner ads



Oklahoma

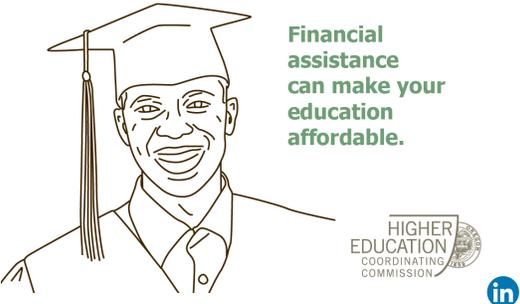
Facebook



Exhibit 5. Sample of adult-oriented marketing materials (continued)

Oregon

LinkedIn



Instagram



Hawaii

Instagram



TV commercial



Note: These marketing examples came from materials used in each state. States sent us exemplars and consented to their use in this publication.



Strategy 3: High-touch helpers

Although tech-based tools can help streamline outreach and enrollment processes, adult learners tend to lean on family and friends when thinking about enrolling. As such, Adult Promise states saw value in more traditional approaches that help build personal connections. For example, state leads in Maine saw their outreach and enrollment effort as a community-level initiative; they reflected that “it takes a village.” Several states implemented warm, high-touch approaches, such as personalized supports and family-friendly recruitment activities, to engage adult learners within the unique constraints of their lives.

Navigator and ambassador programs were powerful in supporting adult engagement. More than 70 percent of Adult Promise institutions surveyed indicated that providing navigation or enrollment assistance services for adult learners was

one of the most effect strategies for getting prospective adult learners to enroll. Either at the state or institution level, navigators guided students through the enrollment and financial aid process, connected them to other support resources, and in some states, like Oklahoma, were trained to serve as academic coaches once students enrolled. Adult students described how a navigator tailored their assistance to the learner, based on the students’ levels of comfort with technology. On one hand, students noted they had a brief meeting with their navigator before enrollment, and then registered for their courses independently online. For others, the navigator worked with individuals or groups through each step of the enrollment process.

States with structured navigator programs provided extensive professional development. For example, Maine’s program, MaineSpark, established a statewide network of advisors and counselors to offer guidance to adult learners.

Their program trained 350+ navigators, assembled resource materials for the Navigator Network, and developed trainings on financial aid for academic advisors and nonacademic support providers. Similarly, in Minnesota, adult learners connected with institutional navigators through a referral program within student services. These navigators offered personalized services to help returning students be successful, ranging from supporting adult learners through the enrollment process to discussing unemployment eligibility. Furthermore, state leads from Minnesota reported that after the shift to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, navigators were able to offer more flexible hours, which benefits students with nontraditional schedules. Oklahoma, had both regional navigators situated in major cities as well as designated navigators at local institutions to engage and enroll students in their Reach Higher program. However, institutional partners in some places expressed frustration with the centrally developed navigator role and the one-size-fits-all approach to their initiative.

An overview of Adult Promise states' approaches to navigator and ambassador initiatives is in Exhibit 6.

Some states also used more informal channels to engage students through "ambassadors," community members with close ties to the people that institutions sought to reach. For example, Kentucky built a grassroots ambassador program through the Graduate! Network and provided robust training opportunities for community ambassadors who engaged prospective adult learners through local churches and community events. In Idaho and Minnesota, ambassadors were librarians. In Kentucky and Oklahoma, ambassadors were leaders in community-based organizations or churches. Ambassadors often had official business cards and brochures to share, which reinforced their credibility among community members. Across the board, ambassadors served as an informal connection between prospective learners and institutions.

Exhibit 6. Overview of Adult Promise navigator and ambassador programs

		 Idaho	 Kentucky	 Maine	 Minnesota	 Oklahoma
 Statewide completion navigator	Liaise between partner institutions and the Adult Promise grantee. Help with recruitment and student interaction/follow-up.					✓
 Regional workforce navigator	In-house navigator at regional workforce office to aid case managers in connecting interested clients to Adult Promise programs.					✓
 Institutional navigator	Direct oversight of individual participants at institutions, supporting recruitment, financial aid, and course registration.			✓	✓	✓
 Community ambassadors	Community member who serves as an informal liaison to the Adult Promise program. They may host recruitment events, including one-stop enrollment events, or more generally create awareness and engage adult learners in Adult Promise programs.	✓	✓		✓	✓

States used family-focused engagement and recruitment events to address the unique experiences of adult learners. States saw value in recruitment approaches that recognize the unique circumstances of adult learners. As discussed earlier, states learned that messaging that acknowledged the importance of family resonated with adult learners. For many adult learners, pursuing further education is a family decision and often motivated by a desire to improve their children's lives or serve as an inspiration to them. With that in mind, some states held family-friendly in-person recruitment events to support adult engagement, noting the importance of holding such events during the evenings and on weekends to accommodate adult learners' typical work schedules. During these events, institutions emphasized their ability to provide flexibility in course offerings and support with transportation and child care. An example of one such approach comes from Oklahoma City Community College's Reach Higher day, where the college invited adult learners to visit the campus on a Saturday with staff on-site to support same-day registration for the upcoming term. Furthermore, a single mother interviewed in Oklahoma who coaches her child's tee-ball team said she appreciates Saturday course offerings, which is another way institutions can provide family-friendly offerings. In Kentucky, Hazard Community and Technical College hosted Tuesday Night Live, during which the college provided instruction, coaching and mentoring, along with child activities and dinner. This family-focused event enabled parents to speak with advisors, the registrar, and other college representatives. Family-friendly, in-person events and meetings create opportunities for prospective adult learners to engage with their local institutions. States' Adult Promise initiatives intentionally expanded their warm hand-off efforts, inviting adult learners and their families into higher education spaces.

Reflections on the experience

This examination of marketing and outreach strategies across the Adult Promise states suggests a few takeaways that may be especially relevant for other state, system, or institutional stakeholders looking to engage or reengage adults in higher education. First, states and institutions should recognize that

the messaging that is most likely to resonate with adult learners may be different from the messaging used to reach students enrolling after high school. Engaging adult learners to understand their motivations for enrolling in higher education can help states and institutions craft appropriate messaging and outreach strategies. Next, adult learners often need more high-touch approaches once they are engaged with an institution. Online tools and navigators can facilitate the process and provide learners the support they need leading up to enrollment. Finally, states and institutions should recognize that enrolling adults is only the first step on the path to credential attainment. Adult learners may need similar high-touch supports to successfully realize their credential goals.

Endnotes

¹ Lumina Foundation. "Tracking America's Progress Toward 2025." 2021. Available at <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2021/#nation>.

² Clinedinst, Melissa. "Chapter 2: Recruitment and Yield Strategies." In 2019 State of College Admission. Arlington, VA: National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2019. Available at https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/2019_soca/soca2019_ch2.pdf.

³ Hagelskamp, Carolin, David Schleifer, and Christopher DiStasi. "Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) to School." Public Agenda and the Kresge Foundation, 2013. Available at <https://www.publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Is-College-Worth-It-for-Me-2013.pdf>.

Connecting to the Adult Promise Evaluation

This brief addresses one component of the Adult Promise Evaluation. Other publications examine the range of work that states completed under the Adult Promise grants:

- [Equity and adult college completion](#)
- [Supporting adult learners from enrollment to completion](#)
- Encouraging institutional readiness for adult learners (forthcoming)

Our [project site](#) provides more information about the Adult Promise evaluation.