

# Key Findings on the College Decision-Making Experiences Among Adult Learners of Color

## Implications and Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions

AIR recently conducted a study of the college decision-making experiences among adult learners of color. This population is an important focus for many institutions seeking to improve enrollment and success while supporting equity and social mobility commitments, as fewer Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults hold college degrees compared to their White counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

*Understanding the decisionmaking processes of adult learners of color is crucial for institutions to create and implement effective recruitment and support strategies.*

Through interviews with 16 adult learners of color and a survey of over 350 adult learners, we explored when and how they make decisions as well as the factors that influenced their decisions. We include practical implications for institutions.

For more detail on the findings and our sample, please visit: <https://www.air.org/project/supporting-postsecondary-enrollment-adult-learners-color>

## Key Findings

### When and how do adult learners of color make enrollment decisions?

Adult learners of color consider (re)enrolling in college for an extended period of time before making an enrollment decision. Their decision-making is often about *whether* and *when* to attend—considerations that can take a long time—rather than choosing *where* to attend at any specific moment.

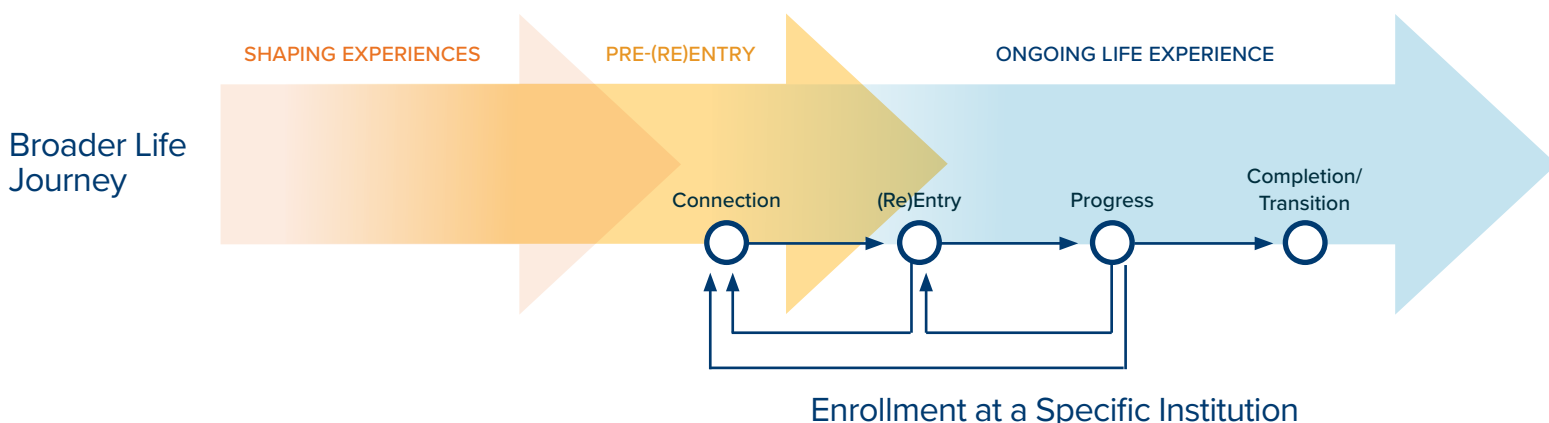
Many of their top concerns, questions, and preferences center on whether they can make college “work” in their lives—financially, logistically, and socially. Timing of information matters: many adult learners described not

learning about key information related to program models *prior* to enrolling, unless they found a specialized program that was designed and marketed specifically for adult learners.

**And, their decision process doesn’t end with enrollment—**it continues even when they’ve chosen and started attending college.



*“Reenrolling each term can feel like a new, active decision, rather than a default.”*



## What factors influence their choices?

Many of the top factors were consistent between adult learners of color and White adults including affordability, location, program modality, and flexible options. However, some factors are more important to adult learners of color than White adult learners when making decisions to enroll or reenroll in college, including:



PERSONAL  
ECOSYSTEM



ACCESS TO  
CHILDCARE AND  
PUBLIC BENEFITS



CONCERNS ABOUT  
BELONGING ON CAMPUS



INFORMATION  
DISPARITIES





CAMPUS RACIAL  
CLIMATE

Additionally, adult learners of color may have adverse prior experiences with postsecondary education or might have received negative messages from K–12 teachers or counselors about whether they were “college material.” These experiences shape whether they think college is for them and whether they will feel welcomed.


## How can institutions better recruit, retain, and support adult learners of color?


Institutions can develop outreach and supports specifically for adult learners of color, with an eye toward identifying and addressing potential sources of inequity.


 Institutions can create outreach and public-facing communication strategies that communicate key information and address the concerns and interests of adult learners of color, given that learners are likely considering college long before they ever contact an institution. This might include websites, affinity group representatives, or current adult learners who share their experiences.


 Because high schools do not serve as a point of contact for adult learners, **institutions need to identify new venues and opportunities for reaching potential adult learners who might be considering (re)enrollment.** This can include outreach strategies through community partners or workplaces.

Administrators, faculty, and staff can make changes to program models and consider ways to publicize and communicate those changes proactively and in ways that resonate with adult learners of color.

 **Avoid assuming that prospective adult learners understand what “college” looks like at your campus.** Institutions can help adult learners understand whether college will “work” for them.

 If an institution already has adult-friendly scheduling options, publicize that information clearly.

 If an institution does not have adult-friendly scheduling options, consider re-evaluating flexible or predictable course scheduling (like course timing, term lengths) or options like competency-based education.

 If none of the above is an option, consider adding support services that reduce scheduling issues. This could include financial aid to help them work less while enrolled, or offering childcare or other resources to address time constraints.

Institutions should share information that is specifically tailored for and resonates with adult learners of color. Messaging can communicate that adult learners of color do belong and are welcome at their institution.