

Beyond the Homepage

How and Whether Websites
Address the Questions and Needs
of Adult Learners of Color

Jasmine Howard
Sachiko Oates
Abril Dominguez
Jessica Mason
Kelle Parsons

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Executive Summary

This report presents key findings that shed light on how institutional websites are addressing the questions, interests, and needs of adult learners, and particularly adult learners of color, who may be considering (re)enrolling in college.

In response to COVID-19's impact on enrollment and demographic changes, many higher education institutions have expressed interest in, or commitment to, serving adult learners. This commitment requires that institutions consider the questions, interests, and needs of adult learners and rethink how to best engage and serve adult learners, particularly addressing the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on adult learners of color (Gallagher, 2021; Sutton, 2021; Weissman, 2021).

Despite increasing adult learner enrollment in postsecondary education (Rabourn, 2018; Soares et al., 2017), more than 82 million adults have never enrolled in postsecondary education, and 40.4 million adult learners have some college credits but no degree. Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults are more likely to fall into these categories than their White counterparts (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Many institutions express interest in engaging and (re)enrolling adult learners as part of their broader enrollment strategy, and these statistics highlight that doing so may tap into a large population. These statistics, however, also highlight the importance of focusing on the questions, interests, and needs of adult learners of color in particular.

This report is one of a series of resources from a study that seeks to understand how colleges and universities are incorporating changes to their practices, policies, and culture in ways that support adult learners, particularly adult learners of color.

To better understand the current landscape of information available on institutions' websites—a primary place prospective adult learners might look for information about a college—we sampled and reviewed 350 postsecondary institutions' websites, with an eye toward identifying how the information presented on these websites addressed key questions that previous research demonstrated are important to their (re)enrollment decisions (see, for example, Parsons et al., 2023). The website scan was based on a framework that includes six categories: website design, flexible program offerings, admissions and enrollment, institutional cost, student services, and career services. **Key takeaways from our review of information provided on websites in these six categories include:**

Website Design (the website's user experience and first impression it offers learners): About half of the websites we reviewed included strong visual representations of their diverse student populations and provided user-friendly website navigation tools, giving prospective learners a positive first impression.

Promising practice: Including imagery and a diverse representation of student testimonials signals inclusivity and highlights an institution's core values.

Flexible Program Offerings: The majority of websites provided information about baseline options for flexibility for adult learners, including online course options and accepting transfer credits. Those that went above and beyond provided information about multiple ways learners could take advantage of timing and location flexibility (e.g., shorter term lengths, evening and weekend classes, a mix of online, hybrid, and in-person options). They also offered a range of options for prior learning assessment, beyond accepting transfer credits and exam credits, recognizing the variety of experiences adult learners bring with them to college.

Promising practice: Highlighting the flexibility of fully online degree programs and presenting a range of options for acknowledging their previous learning and work experience may resonate well with adult learners, offering convenience and accessibility.

Institutional Cost: In this category, about half of the websites we reviewed provided clear information for learners about the cost of attendance for both full-time and part-time enrollment, with details about non-loan financial aid available to adult learners and learners of color. Websites that had especially strong information provided manipulable tools for learners to calculate the cost of attendance for their unique situations and included supportive messaging about the cost of attendance.

Promising practice: Providing clear information about scholarships targeted toward adult learners or learners with specific identities can alleviate financial concerns and encourage enrollment.

Admissions and Enrollment: We found that there is substantial room for improvement in terms of the information included on websites about admissions and enrollment. This encompasses the instructions for the process, a structured framework to follow, and guidance on inquiry procedures, such as contact information. As with other categories, clear information that is written in a supportive and customized way for adult learners is important in addressing adult learners' questions. In particular, some websites offered "student profiles" (e.g., adult learners, transfer students, veterans) that allowed learners to get information specific to their situation.

Promising practice: Providing clearly titled, customized pathways for different types of learners can help users access the information they need, streamlining the enrollment process.

Student Support Services: Most websites in our sample provided information on some types of support services, but oftentimes, the information focused on required accommodations and standard academic services, like disability support, tutoring, and academic advising. Although these supports are important for all students, websites that provided information about additional support services that directly address other needs adults may have, including childcare, transportation, and basic needs supports, went further toward addressing common questions adult learners of color have.

Promising practice: Providing information about services that specifically address common adult learner needs and identities signals institutions value holistic well-being and success.

Career Services: Most institutions had limited information. Those that were rated highly in this category demonstrated a commitment to transparency in their marketing and provided comprehensive overviews of the services they offer.

Promising practice: Ensuring prospective learners can access information without login credentials or barriers may signal that there are further opportunities beyond coursework to prepare for careers, enhancing career readiness support.

Emerging themes from this website scan underscore the necessity of delivering supportive messages tailored for adults, offering culturally responsive information and resources, and ensuring easy access to information that does not require complex navigation or the submission of personal details by users.

This report concludes by offering considerations for institutions interested in improving the information on their websites to better reach prospective adult learners.

Introduction

As higher education institutions seek to recover and expand enrollment numbers in the wake of COVID-19 enrollment decreases and ongoing demographic shifts, many institutional leaders and practitioners¹ have expressed interest in, or commitment to, serving adult learners. Meaningfully engaging and serving this population, though, requires considering the questions, interests, and needs of adult learners and rethinking how best to engage and equitably serve them. In particular, institutions may need to consider and address reasons that COVID-19 disproportionately affected enrollment among adult learners of color, especially in community colleges (Gallagher, 2021; Sutton, 2021; Weissman, 2021).

Despite the increasing number of adult learners in college (Rabourn, 2018; Soares et al., 2017), more than 82 million adults have never enrolled in postsecondary education, and 40.4 million adult learners have some college credits but no degree. Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults are more likely to fall into these categories than their White counterparts (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), indicating a need to give special focus to the needs of adult learners of color when it comes to college enrollment or (re)enrollment.

Previous research conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) highlighted that having clear, relevant, and timely information was an important factor in supporting college-going decision making among adult learners of color. Having access to key information during the period they were *considering* (re)enrolling—but had not yet decided to do so—emerged as a critical factor in helping them decide to return (Parsons et al., 2023). Other research also has demonstrated that for adults who seek flexible options to make college work with their lives, inadequate information on the types and varieties of programs that are available can challenge their ability to find a program that they perceive as aligned with their needs and goals, potentially deterring their college pursuits. This can be especially true among adults who have never enrolled in college and often rely on online sources for information (Darnell, 2022).

Building on this prior research, we sought to better understand the current landscape of information available via institutions' websites to adult learners of color who are making decisions about college. In this study, we sampled and scanned 350 college and university websites, focused on how information provided on websites addressed key questions that adult learners of color had identified as important to their decisions during our previous research (Parsons et al., 2023). In particular, we focused on the overall website user experience and clarity of information about flexible program offerings, admissions processes and requirements, institutional cost, and types and availability of student support services and career services.

¹ In this brief, we define "practitioners" as staff and faculty at all levels of an institution—including those that work directly with students, anyone in department or unit leadership roles, and those in mid-level or senior-level leadership roles with purview across departments. Our approach to this work assumes that effort from most units, and most levels, is critical to serving adult learners.

Our landscape scan sought to inform the following question:

How well do current institutional websites address the specific questions identified by adult learners of color as influential factors in their decision-making process for enrolling in postsecondary education?

Overall, we found that many institutions' websites **are not** answering most of the questions that adult learners of color indicated are critical to their decision making, particularly those related to admissions and enrollment processes and career services. Through this review, we also identified several cross-cutting promising practices in terms of the way that information is presented.

Generally, websites that address adult learners' questions well do the following:

- provide clear and specific messaging relevant to adult learners to meet their unique needs and experiences;
- indicate comprehensive and culturally relevant information and resources; and
- ensure that information is easily accessible and transparent.

Our next section describes our methods and approach to the website scan, after which we summarize findings for each of the categories we focused on in our ratings.





Methods and Approach

We conducted a website scan of 350 postsecondary institutions' websites to address our research question. Although adult learners receive information about college through many different channels (e.g., from family members, previous educational experiences, or jobs), institutional websites are an important first step many prospective adult students take in seeking information about college options.² In contrast to high school students, who receive information about college options through multiple channels like direct (e)mail campaigns, guidance counselors, and college fairs, adult learners seeking

information on postsecondary options typically do not have these opportunities. Colleges' virtual front doors—their websites—therefore play a major role in adult learners' efforts to find information and make decisions about if and where to pursue a postsecondary degree, as do conversations with and information received from friends or family (Goble et al., 2021). Websites also are important for learners of color; some studies have found that Black and Hispanic students are increasingly relying on websites to evaluate and choose colleges and universities (Berry, 2021; Wilson & Meyer, 2009).

² We define adult learners as adults between the ages of 25 and 64 who currently do not have a postsecondary education credential but are either currently enrolled or considering (re)enrolling. We consider adult learners of color to include adult learners that identify as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or Indigenous.

Sample

To develop our analytical sample of 350 institutions, we used enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System on adult learner enrollment, U.S. Census data on overall degree attainment by state, and U.S. Census data to identify states with significant proportions of people who are Black, Hispanic, and Native American.

We began by using data from IPEDS for all 6,003 Title IV institutions, with institutional characteristics from the 2022 data year. We then identified all institutions that met the following criteria: either 2-year or 4-year institutions; either private not-for-profit or public institutions; and an undergraduate enrollment of at least 100 students. Additionally, we excluded any institutions that enrolled fewer than 300 adult learners ages 25 to 64. This resulted in our base sample of 1,587 institutions.

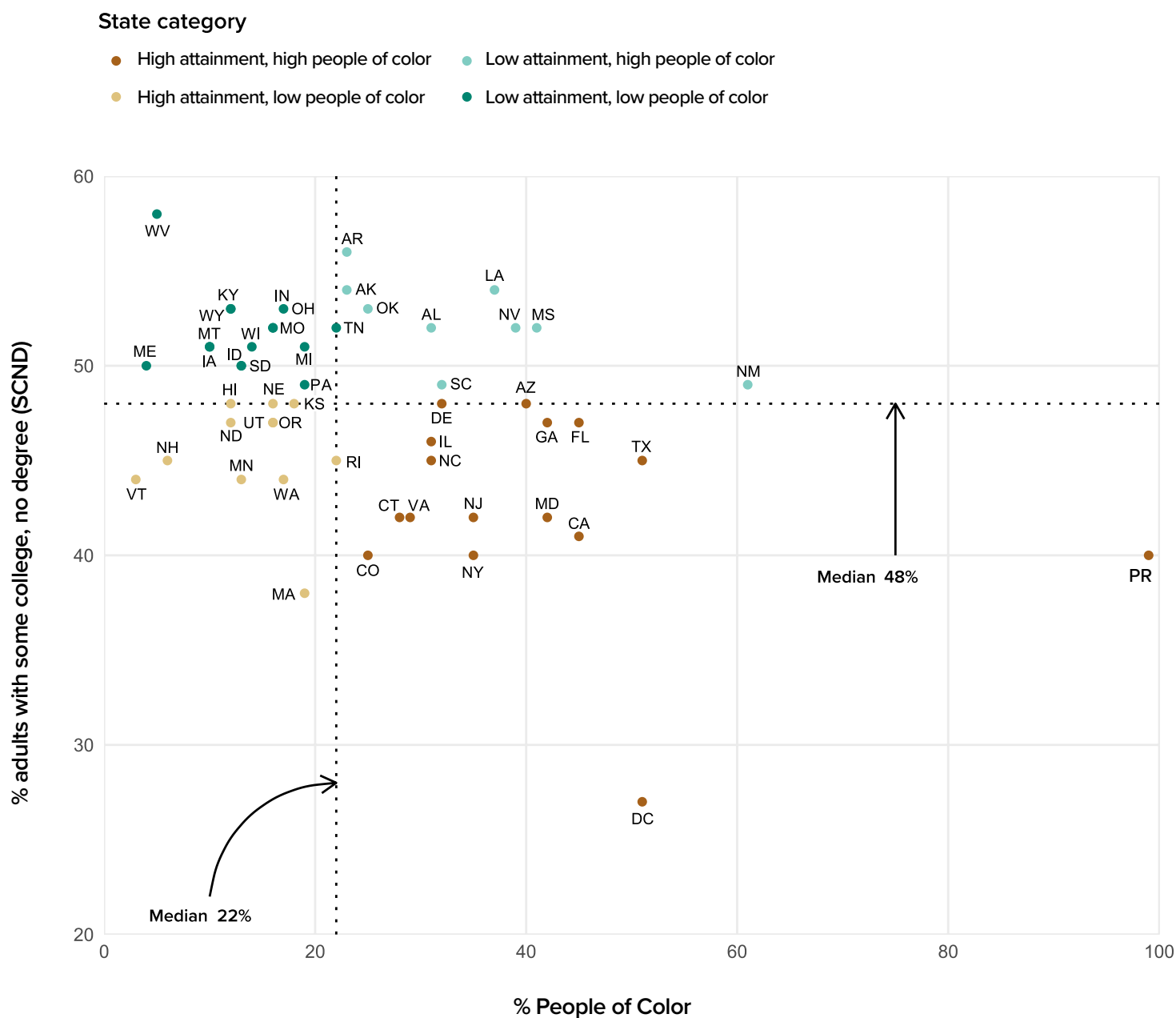
Next, we used population data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey to identify target states for oversampling based on two key characteristics of the states' population: above-median shares of people who are Black, Hispanic, and Native American and below-median overall postsecondary degree attainment. Using these data, we categorized states into four groups ("quadrants") based on the percent of states' adult population who are Black, Hispanic, or Native American and the percent of the adult population who did not have at least an associate degree (i.e., the percent of adults with either high school or "some college, no degree" as their highest educational attainment). This allowed us to identify geographical areas from which to oversample institutions from our IPEDS base sample.



Our final analytical sample included 350 institutions, from states represented in the four “quadrants” as pictured in Figure 1. The percentages of institutions in each quadrant are as follows, with bold text indicating the quadrants that we oversampled:

- **above-median share of people of color; above-median postsecondary credential attainment: 29%**
- **above-median share of people of color; below-median postsecondary credential attainment: 34%**
- below-median share of people of color; above-median postsecondary credential attainment: 16%
- below-median share of people of color; below-median postsecondary credential attainment: 21%

FIGURE 1. STATES BY POPULATION AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



We used this approach in an effort to identify a sample that adequately represented the diversity of potential adult learners across different demographic and educational backgrounds. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the count of institutions included in our sample in each state as a result of this sampling strategy, and Table 1 describes in more detail the characteristics of institutions included in our sample.

FIGURE 2. INSTITUTION COUNT IN ANALYTIC SAMPLE, BY STATE

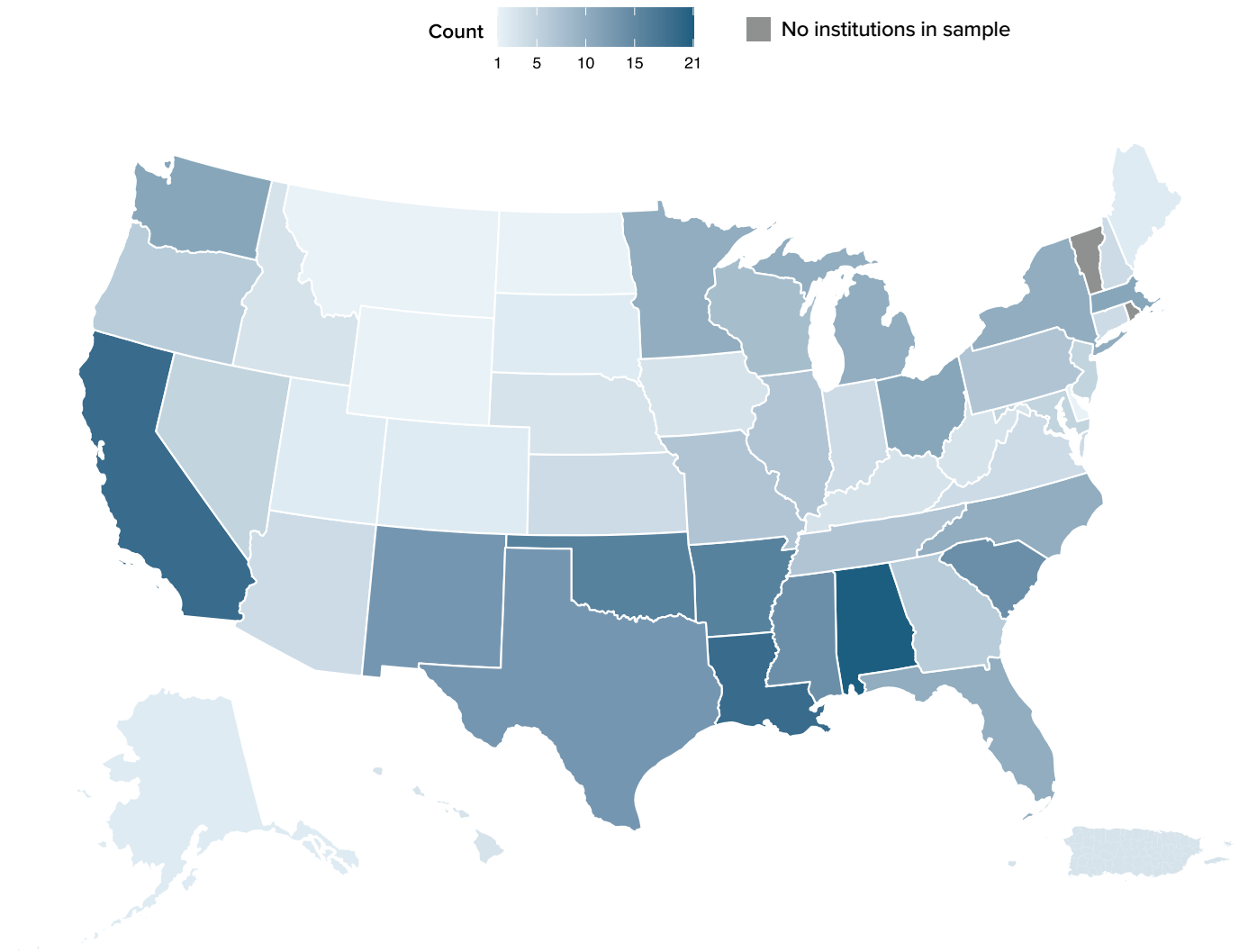


TABLE 1. INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS IN ANALYTIC SAMPLE

INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS	COUNT
Level	
2-year	195
4-year	155
Control	
Public	304
Private	46
Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI)	
Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI)	65
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)	14
Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU)	3
MSI	82
PWI	268
Adult Learner Undergraduate Enrollment (Quartile)	
Q1 (2% to 17%)	90
Q2 (18% to 28%)	90
Q3 (29% to 37%)	87
Q4 (38% to 88%)	83
Undergraduate Enrollment Size	
15,000 and above	89
10,000 – 14,999	51
5,000 – 9,999	81
Under 5,000	129

Website Scan Framework

Our framework for this website scan is based on AIR's previous research (Parsons et al., 2023) and existing research in the field related to adult learners' college going decision making. The framework included six categories:

- website design (the website's user experience and first impressions it offers learners)
- flexible program offerings
- admissions and enrollment
- institutional cost
- student services
- career services

This section describes these categories, additional literature that informed our approach, and the key characteristics we prioritized for rating in our rubrics.



Website Design

Because an institution's website is often the first source of information for prospective learners, an important component of our website scan was the user experience and overall first impressions that the website, and especially its homepage, leaves learners with. In addition to the user experience, or how a user interacts with and experiences the website, the imagery and text presented on homepages provides an opportunity for institutions to communicate with prospective learners they are trying to engage.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR

Website Design and User Experience

- Homepages get more views than other pages on a website and are often where search engine results direct users.
- Homepages should clearly communicate the key messages that institutions want to convey to prospective learners.
- Homepage design should help visitors to the site easily find the top information they need, via menus and visible, functional search features (Nielsen, 2002).

WEBSITE SCAN CRITERIA

- Clear, simple menus that offer easy access to the top information that prospective students need.
- A functional, visible search feature.

First Impressions

- Websites that include short uplifting slogans and information help engage prospective adult learners (Goble et al., 2021).
- Encouraging messaging and visuals that are representative of their experiences and address their specific concerns and needs provide an important first impression for prospective learners, especially those who may have been out of school for some time and be concerned about whether college is the right fit for them (Parsons et al., 2023).

- Imagery and text that is representative of adult learners of different genders and intersecting identities (e.g., cultural and ethnic identities, ages, genders, disability status, parental or caregiving status) and signals support, tailored programming, and understanding of adult learners' needs and goals.

Flexible Program Offerings

“Flexible program offerings” refers to program features that support adult learners of color by offering flexibility to make college “fit” with their lives. This can include flexible course scheduling options (evening, weekend, or part-time options); options for program modality (online, in-person, and hybrid options); flexibility in program pacing and term length; and recognition of prior learning via credit transfer, prior learning assessment, military credit recognition, work-based experiences, or other evidence of content or skill mastery that can streamline their time to degree.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR	WEBSITE SCAN CRITERIA
• Adult learners often bring relevant prior credits, certifications, or life experiences, and knowing this might count toward their degree can be important for their (re)enrollment decisions—and also can improve graduation outcomes (Klein-Collins, 2020). • The ability to transfer credits is a key decision factor for many adult learners seeking to (re)enroll in college (Parsons et al., 2023). • Adult learners are less likely than younger students to enroll full-time or reside on campus, preferring flexible participation that accommodates their other commitments (Soares et al., 2017). • Being able to find information about availability of program and course schedules that allow adult learners to manage multiple responsibilities and fit college coursework into their schedules is a key motivator to enroll in college (Parsons et al., 2023).	• Flexibility in terms of timing and pace of program (e.g., online courses, short-term lengths, options for flexible or self-paced progression through courses, evening and weekend scheduling options). • Multiple opportunities to receive credit for prior learning or experience.

Institutional Cost

The cost of attendance is a key determinant of accessibility and equity in education, and it is a primary consideration for adult learners of color who are making decisions about (re)enrolling in college and which college to attend. Adult learners are likely to have financial responsibilities for housing, childcare, and potentially even existing student loans from previous education that they must consider when determining the affordability of college, and some may view institutional cost as a barrier to (re)enrollment.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR

- Many adult learners who have some college credit but no credential stopped out of college as a result of financial reasons (Munip & Klein-Collins, 2023).
- Institutional cost is a primary driver of adult learners' decisions about which college to attend (Parsons et al., 2023).
- Many adult learners report that information about institutional cost is difficult to find and the process of navigating financial aid options is intimidating and confusing (Parsons et al., 2023).

WEBSITE SCAN CRITERIA

- Clear information about the cost of attendance for both full-time and part-time attendance.
- Transparent breakdown of tuition and fee structure.
- Scholarships and grants that are applicable and available to adult learners.
- Estimation tools for cost calculation (including a Net Price Calculator) that include options for learners to calculate as a part-time or independent student.



Admissions and Enrollment

When making (re)enrollment decisions, it is critical that adult learners can easily find the information they need and that the enrollment process is clearly delineated and streamlined. Complicated enrollment processes are a primary obstacle to adult learners’ (re)enrollment.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR	WEBSITE SCAN CRITERIA
• Complicated enrollment processes are a barrier for adult learner (re)enrollment (Hunte et al., 2020; Patterson, 2018). • Information regarding transfer credits is especially important as adult learners have a higher likelihood of having obtained certificates or degrees before their current enrollment compared to traditional students (Radwin et al., 2013). • Easy access to “high-touch helpers” or admissions navigators/counselors who can help learners navigate complex processes is an important complement to information provided on websites (Goble et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2023).	• Information about admissions specifically tailored to adult learners. • Access to and information about how to contact admissions counselors. • Clearly listed deadlines for application and implications of those deadlines on financial aid. • Comprehensive lists of required documents, with convenient options for document submission.

Student Support Services

Effectively supporting adult learners involves implementing comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' abilities as self-directed, lifelong learners. Website information about the types of supports and services available to students should recognize and acknowledge the varied and unique needs of adult learners.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR

- Comprehensive academic and student support systems enhance self-direction and lifelong learning for adult learners (Compton et al., 2006).
- Support programs that mitigate work-related scheduling challenges and constraints related to childcare responsibilities are especially important for adult learners of color (Parsons et al., 2023).
- Identity-relevant supports, like affinity groups for adult learners or learners who identify as a common racial or ethnic background help adult learners of color develop a sense of belonging and facilitates goal achievement (Parsons et al., 2023).

WEBSITE SCAN CRITERIA

- Information about multiple types of adult-relevant student support services, including:
 - transportation services to and from campus or financial support for transportation
 - childcare
 - health and wellness services
 - affinity or identity-based groups
 - student disability services
 - re-entry to college or transition advising
- Information about support services that is supportive and tailored to adult learners.



Career-Specific Supports

For many adult learners, beginning a new career or improving career opportunities within current employment are motivating factors for (re)enrolling in college. Relatedly, many adult learners also aim to increase economic mobility by (re)enrolling in college.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR	WEBSITE SCAN CRITERIA
• Economic mobility and career advancement are common motivators for adult learners considering (re)enrolling in college (Parsons et al., 2023). • An institution’s reputation for job placement is an important influence in adult learners’ decisions about which college to apply to (Darnell et al., 2022; Parsons et al., 2023). • Strong career-specific supports that resonate with adults should include work-relevant programs, career advising and networking support, experiential learning opportunities, and support in making connections with employers (Darnell et al., 2022).	• Career services available to students including career planning, coaching, resume preparation, and interview preparation. • Information about job placement rates or career pathways for different majors or programs of study. • Employer partnerships listed for internship opportunities and career placement. • Tailored events to support career preparation.

Rubric for Rating Websites

After establishing the framework for the website scan, we developed a rubric for rating websites in each of the framework categories. The rubric is based on research related to the components, and our scale notes distinguishing features in each category. The overall rubric scale, which we applied to each category, is as follows:

- **Exceptional:** Demonstrates outstanding support and practices tailored to adult learners, surpassing expectations. Exceptional quality, depth, and achievement in meeting the criteria, showcasing a comprehensive understanding of adult learner needs. Importantly, there is tangible evidence of active engagement and impactful support specifically for adult learners of color, contributing to a diverse and inclusive learning environment.
- **Proficient:** Meets the criteria at a high level of competence for adult learners. Support and practices are solid, satisfactory, and align well with the unique expectations and requirements of adult learners. Although proficient, this level may lack the depth of evidence showing a robust presence and impact of adult learners of color in the overall support structure.
- **Basic:** Demonstrates a basic level of achievement in meeting the criteria for adult learners. Support and practices are satisfactory but may lack depth, consistency, or full adherence to the specific needs of adult learners. Evidence and engagement of adult learners is visible, but may not be as prominent or impactful, particularly for adult learners of color.
- **Limited:** Shows limited achievement in meeting the criteria for adult learners. Support and practices are noticeably below the expected standard, with notable deficiencies or gaps in addressing the unique challenges of adult learners. The presence and engagement of adult learners, especially those of color, may be minimal or insufficient to make a substantial impact.

Finally, we employed a user-testing approach to pilot the rubric on institution websites and sought feedback from an adult learner advisory group.³ That feedback helped ensure that the rubric accurately reflected the experiences and needs of adult learners. Once the rubric was developed, we conducted inter-rater reliability testing among the research team members to ensure consistency in rating across categories and made final revisions. For each of the 350 websites included in the scan, we rated them using the scale and rubric outlined above and provided narrative justifications for each of the ratings.

³ To support this project, we have engaged a group of adult learners of color who serve as advisors, providing feedback on data collection and analysis approaches, project goals, and reporting and dissemination.

Data Analysis

Once the website scan was complete, we took a two-pronged approach to data analysis. First, we conducted a descriptive analysis of the ratings in each category to identify trends in how websites were rated. For this descriptive analysis, we examined the distribution of ratings across the four rubric categories to understand the extent to which websites are addressing key questions that adult learners of color have. We share findings about these distributions for each category in the following sections. We also explored whether there were any key differences in ratings by institutional characteristics, including:

- **level:** 2-year and 4-year
- **control:** public and private
- **PWI and MSI status:** Hispanic-serving institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and universities
- **percent adult learner enrollment by quartile**
- **undergraduate enrollment count**

Throughout the report, we make it a point to highlight differences in ratings across various dimensions, wherever applicable. Additionally, we specifically highlight major differences across levels and between MSIs and PWIs.

Next, we conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative justifications for each of the ratings to uncover common themes across the websites. This qualitative analysis allowed us to identify and highlight in this report strategies institutions use to engage and communicate how they support adult learners via their websites, as well as promising practices and areas for improvement in serving adult learners of color.

An important consideration for interpreting findings is that the development and use of qualitative rubrics inherently involves some level of subjectivity. Although the criteria included in our rubric were informed by existing research and in-depth input from adult learners, we acknowledge that other types of information may also affect and influence decision making for these prospective learners.

Findings

In this section, we present key findings derived from our analysis, focusing on the six categories included in our framework.

Overall, we find that there is substantial room for improvement in terms of whether, how, and how accessibly institutions' websites address the key questions that are most important to adult learners of color. This is particularly true in terms of admissions and enrollment processes, along with career-specific supports.

Still, we find and highlight promising practices across all categories that may provide useful insights for institutions working to better address the questions that are most influential for adult learners of color in their decisions to (re)enroll in college and which colleges to apply to/attend.



Website Design

Overall, we found that about half of the websites in our sample included strong visual representations of their diverse student populations and provided user-friendly website navigation tools. In particular, we found:

- **Most websites have relatively strong design and user experience:** For website user experience, most websites were rated at basic (34%) and proficient (41%), with considerably fewer rated at limited (3%), and exceptional (22%).
- **There is room for improvement in terms of the first impressions that websites provide:** For first impressions, nearly three-quarters of websites were rated basic (32%) and proficient (41%). Fifteen percent rated limited still had considerable room for improvement, and just 12% were rated exceptional.
- **Four-year institutions were more likely to receive high ratings in this category:** This was especially true for the user experience and design of the website, with 44% of websites rated at proficient and 26% rated at exceptional. In comparison, 38% of websites for 2-year institutions received proficient ratings and 19% received exceptional ratings.

- **Websites for MSIs and institutions with high adult learner enrollment make a strong first impression:**

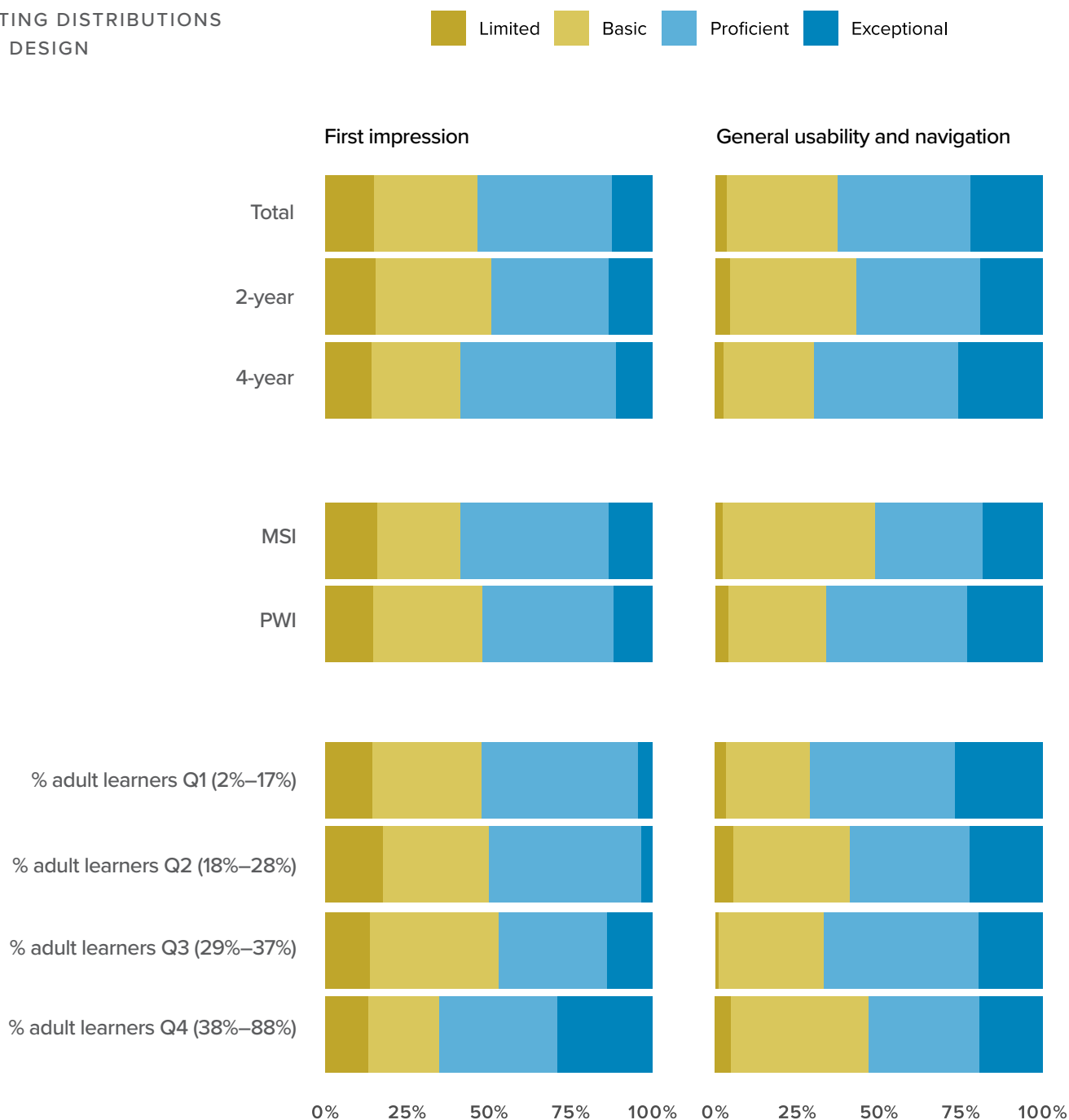
Websites from these institutions were more likely to be rated at proficient (45%) or exceptional (13%) for first impression than websites for PWIs (40% and 12%, respectively), likely because the websites were designed to reflect the institutions' student populations.

Figure 3 presents the distribution of ratings for both user experience and first impressions, highlighting key differences by institution level, MSI status, and adult learner enrollment.

WEBSITE DESIGN CRITERIA

- clear, simple menus that offer easy access to the top information that prospective students need
- a functional, visible search feature
- imagery and text that is representative of adult learners of different genders and intersecting identities (e.g., cultural and ethnic identities, ages, genders, disability status, parental or caregiving status) and signals support, tailored programming, and understanding of adult learners' needs and goals

FIGURE 3. RATING DISTRIBUTIONS FOR WEBSITE DESIGN



The rest of this section describes promising practices we identified related to ease of navigation and representation and inclusivity via imagery and text.

Ease of Navigation

Promising Practice: Paying attention to “information-to-click” ratios.

Institutions that received high ratings demonstrated what we call a high “information-to-click” ratio, meaning that users can find the information they need on key topics (e.g., admissions, academic programs, and student life) with a minimal number of clicks or open tabs. For example, some websites featured a prominent panel on their homepage or admissions page asking, “*What best describes you?*” with response options such as “first-time college student,” “transfer student,” and “military/veteran.” By self-selecting, visitors can then navigate to a webpage with content tailored to their needs, saving them time and effort. In contrast, some websites with lower information-to-click ratios led users to click through ten or more pages before finding the information they need.

Promising Practice: Prominently displaying contact information.

Another key feature that improves the user experience is easily available contact information or methods for getting more information or asking questions. Websites where contact information was readily available displayed contact information for common departments that prospective students would visit, such as admissions, financial aid, and student services, in a callout box or other prominent design feature on every webpage. This approach enhanced the user experience by providing order and predictability as visitors navigated the site. As an example, one institution’s website provides a virtual lobby under the “Connect With Us” page. Here, information about operating hours, available services, and instructions for how to connect with different institutional departments is clearly outlined. This feature provides an avenue for prospective students to receive prompt answers to their questions, which may be particularly beneficial for busy adult learners. A more common, but less effective, approach to including contact information is the use of staff directories. Although these directories allow users to find direct contact information, they can also be cumbersome to navigate since they often require that a user already know the name or position of who they need to contact.

Representation and Inclusivity Via Imagery and Text

Promising Practice: Featuring imagery and testimonials of adult learners of color.

A key distinguishing factor when it comes to first impressions of a website is how the website signals representation and inclusivity through imagery and text. This includes purposeful imagery that showcases diversity and core values, setting a positive tone and fostering an impression that the institution welcomes and supports adult learners of color. Additionally, some websites featured student testimonials from a diverse set of learners, providing insights into the student experience, and highlighting success stories, which is particularly relevant for adult learners considering the value of their investment in education. These narratives serve as testimonials that illustrate the impact of the institution on learners' lives and underscore institutions' commitments to supporting adult learners. For example, one website highlighted a student's satisfaction with the flexible options the university provided: *"The schedule is flexible enough to accommodate more than just schoolwork in your personal life."*

Promising Practice: Highlighting adult-relevant services.

Other websites stood out by highlighting services specifically tailored to students of color, undocumented students, and first-generation students on the homepage. For example, on the homepage of one website that highlighted these services, each service description included a representative thumbnail image, a clear description of the services provided, and a direct link to the corresponding webpage.

Promising Practice: Creating dedicated webpages for adult learners.

Another approach is the use of a dedicated webpage for adult learners that addresses common concerns they may have, with reassuring messaging and direct links to resources. For example, one website includes an adult learners webpage that presents a list of common barriers in a format resembling an FAQ. At the top, a compelling question asks, *"Is this what's stopping you?"* Then below, it lists out common barriers such as, *"I tried before and it didn't work out"* and *"Childcare is a challenge."* When users click on a specific barrier, they receive reassurance and direct links to resources they might be able to use to overcome said barrier.

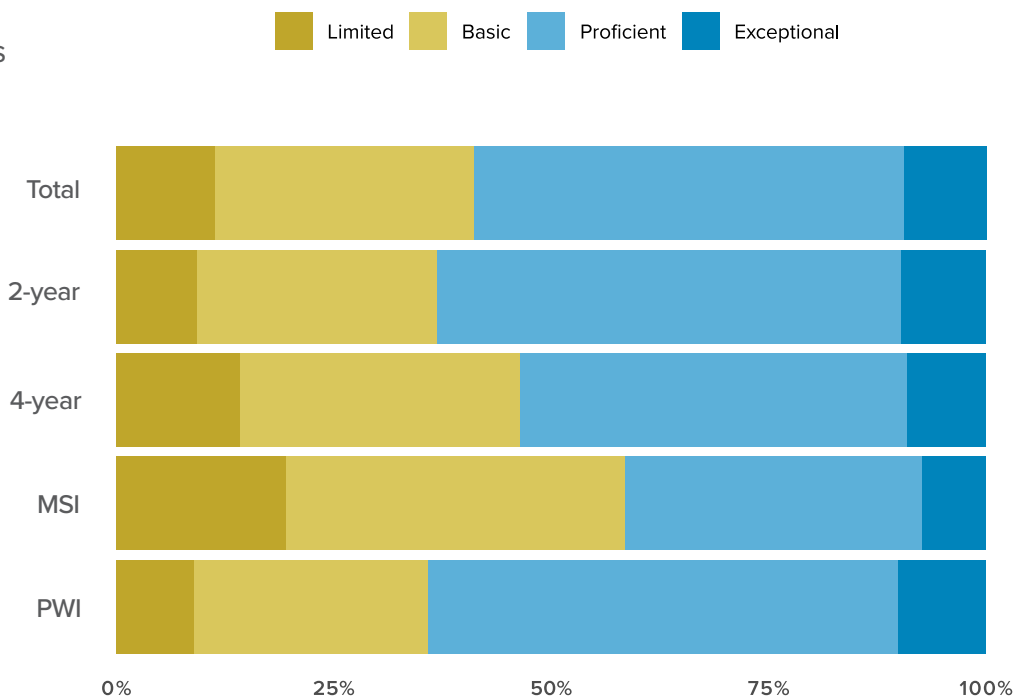
Flexible Program Offerings

Although most websites provide some information about flexible program offerings, there is considerable variation in the types of offerings across institutions. Accessibility of information and language used to communicate also varies. Overall, we found that:

- **Most websites provide at least some flexible program offerings, like online courses and transfer credits:** The majority of websites were rated at basic (30%) and proficient (49%). Few websites were rated exceptional (10%) and limited (11%).
- **Two-year institutions' websites typically included more information about flexible programming:** In this category, a larger share of 2-year institutions were rated at proficient or exceptional (62%) than 4-year institutions (48%). This may suggest that community colleges more often provide—or at least communicate about—flexible course offerings aligned with the needs of adult learners.
- **MSI websites included less information about flexible programming than PWI websites:** MSIs tended to be more likely to receive basic (39%) or limited (20%) ratings than institutions without an MSI designation (34% and 15%, respectively).

Figure 4 presents the distribution of ratings for flexible program offerings, highlighting key differences by institution level and MSI status.

FIGURE 4. RATING DISTRIBUTION FOR FLEXIBLE PROGRAM OFFERINGS



In the rest of this section, we describe the common and distinguishing features of website information about flexible program offerings related to flexible scheduling and pacing, credit for prior learning (CPL), and other programming that is supportive of adult learners.

FLEXIBLE PROGRAM OFFERINGS CRITERIA

- flexibility in terms of timing and pace of program (e.g., online course options, short term lengths, options for flexible or self-paced progression through courses, evening and weekend scheduling options)
- multiple opportunities to receive credit for prior learning or experience

Flexible scheduling

Promising Practice: Provision of full online degree programs with adult-specific messaging.

The majority of institutions in our sample communicated about some form of online programming. Online programming options ranged from limited program or course offerings (i.e., online options for only a limited number of courses or degree programs), to fully online degrees or institutions. Key features of online programming that may be more resonant to adult learners of color include full degree programs that can be taken entirely online and offer a range of course timing options, as well as online program information that is tailored specifically to adult learners or speaks to common concerns adults may have. For example, one website highlights the flexibility of online learning, saying “*You can get the education employers are looking for – from anywhere, on your own time. Our online programs allow you to flex your learning around your busy schedule.*” Another institution’s website features a “College for Adults” that offers online programming and highlights the flexibility inherent in online learning.

Promising Practice: Multiple options for flexibility.

A smaller share of institutions in our sample provide easily accessible information about other flexible scheduling options. For example, some institutions highlight evening or weekend course options. Some institutions also offer shorter term lengths (e.g., 6- or 8-week terms, “mini-mesters”), but information about these was often not included in prospective student-facing pages, even though this kind of information is important for many prospective adult learners. Rather, users often have to search specifically for academic calendars. Another, even less common option mentioned on websites is the availability of self-paced or flexibly paced courses or degree programs. Similarly, some institutions provide information about stackable credentials, short-term certificates, or non-degree credentials (e.g., bootcamps or professional licenses).



Credit for Prior Learning

Promising Practice: Offering multiple options for recognizing prior learning and experience.

The most common way that institutional websites address Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) is by providing information about transferring credits from other postsecondary institutions. The amount of information about the process was varied, from simply stating that transfer credits were accepted, to providing detailed information about the timeline, process, and how to estimate the number of credits that would transfer. Another relatively common means of recognizing prior learning is military credit recognition, which previous research shows plays a role in the experience that student veterans—also adult learners—have in college (Jiang et al., 2021). Although transfer and military credits are very important for incoming students, not all institutions provide clear information about how these credits are awarded or who is eligible, or the information may be very difficult to find on websites.

Websites that went above and beyond offered more options for prior learning assessment (PLA) than these baseline offerings. In terms of PLA, there are several common ways of assessing and rewarding prior learning described on websites. The most common form of PLA is credit by exam, which can include high school exams like Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate, and the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), which is a program offered through the College Board that offers 34 exams covering introductory college content that can be accepted for credit at postsecondary institutions.⁴ Fewer institutions go above and beyond by offering a range of PLA options that are based on learners demonstrating their skills and knowledge, such as by developing a portfolio or presenting their experience. Another less common form of PLA is awarding credit directly for learners who have industry certifications or credentials or other work experience.

Promising Practice: Using language specifically tailored to adult learners.

Finally, institution websites that are most supportive and thus rated highly on our rubric include those that use language that is specifically tailored to adult learners and adult learners of color, and those websites that promote programming specifically for adults. Additionally, information about CPL on these websites is often clearly provided or linked from admissions information or on pages that provide information specifically for adult learners. **For example, one website provided information about CPL options in clearly supportive language on an adult learner-specific page:**

“Not all college credit comes from a classroom. The skills you have picked up working in previous or current jobs matter more than you might think. Local employers are looking for individuals with unique combinations of skills across industries, and [our college] is a partner in preparing a ready workforce.”

⁴ Military-connected learners can take these exams free of charge under the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support program; CLEP is often advertised as a form of CPL for military-connected learners.

Institutional Cost

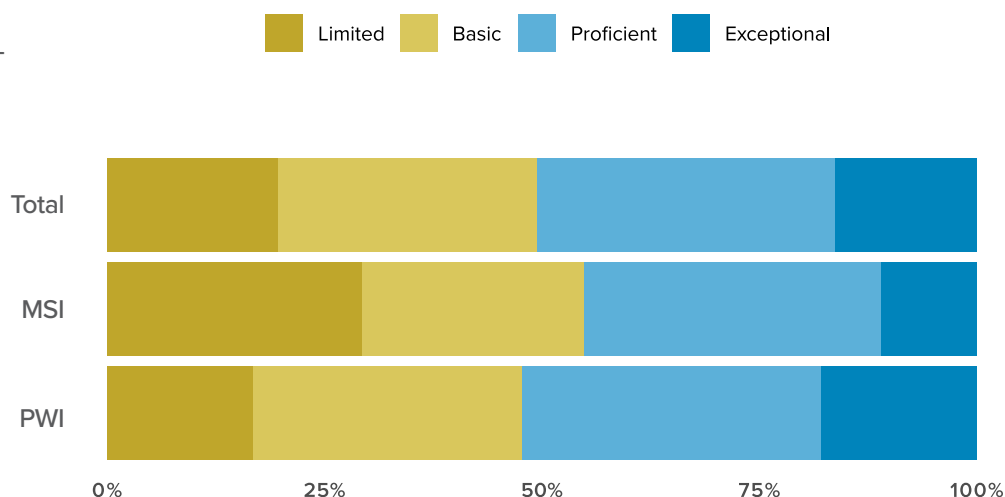
In our exploration of institutional cost information, we found that there is room for improvement in terms of how institutions provide information about the cost of attendance and financial aid. Specifically, we found:

- **Quality of information about institutional cost can be improved for half of the websites in our sample:** Half of the websites in our sample rated at proficient (34%) and exceptional (16%), with the remaining half offering information that was either basic (30%) or limited (20%).

- **Websites with lower ratings could enhance their transparency regarding tuition costs, fee structures, and scholarship offerings:** Twenty-nine percent of MSI websites were rated as limited, compared to 17% of PWI websites.

Figure 5 presents the distribution of ratings for institutional cost, highlighting key differences by MSI status.

FIGURE 5. DISTRIBUTION OF RATINGS FOR INSTITUTIONAL COST



In the remainder of the section, we describe promising practices for providing information about institutional cost that is supportive of adult learners, related to clarity of information and equitable access and support for adult learners.

INSTITUTIONAL COST CRITERIA

- clear information about the cost of attendance for both full-time and part-time attendance
- transparent breakdown of tuition and fee structure
- scholarships and grants that are applicable and available to adult learners
- estimation tools for cost calculation that include options for learners to calculate as a part-time or independent student

Clarity of Information

Promising Practice: Providing cost information that adjusts for different enrollment intensities and situations.

The majority of institutions' websites in our sample provided a set of basic information points about the cost of attendance (e.g., tuition and fees, financial aid options like grants, loans, and scholarships). Some of the baseline information we found on the websites is information that is federally mandated to be presented to prospective students (e.g., all institutions must include a Net Price Calculator).⁵ But this type of basic information typically does not adequately address the needs of adult learners who may not enroll full time and who have different financial commitments than students who enroll directly from high school. Websites that went above and beyond the required information demonstrated a clear and direct approach to presenting overall cost and financial aid information. The articulation of specific cost breakdowns for required and miscellaneous fees and cost of attendance for both full and part-time enrollment can better support informed decision making for adults considering college. Some websites also provided Net Price Calculators that allowed prospective adult learners to manipulate more variables relevant to them (e.g., number of credits that will transfer, number of dependent family members, living off-campus).

Equitable Access and Support for Adult Learners

Promising Practice: Including information about adult-specific scholarships.

Some websites clearly specify scholarships and grants that are specifically applicable to adult learners. This includes scholarships or grants that explicitly mention eligibility for adult learners, non-traditional students, identity-specific eligibility and students of color, workforce-specific, and re-entry to college students. Still, we found information about these types of scholarships on only a small share—just 6%—of institutions' financial aid webpages.

Websites include comprehensive descriptions of these scholarship types that are easily accessible and include information about deadlines and requirements. Many of these scholarships have no or minimal GPA requirements, eliminating a significant barrier to entry and ensuring that adult learners are not disadvantaged in finding affordable ways to (re)enroll based on past academic performance. Information about adult-specific scholarships is often accompanied by supportive messaging that is directed at common concerns adult learners have regarding institutional cost. **For instance, one institution's scholarship brochure conveys a strong message of inclusivity and opportunity:**

"Finishing your college degree and preparing for the next chapter in your life can be an affordable reality, relieving the financial burden often associated with higher education."

⁵ Net Price Calculators are mandated to be included on all institution websites as a result of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008.

Admissions and Enrollment

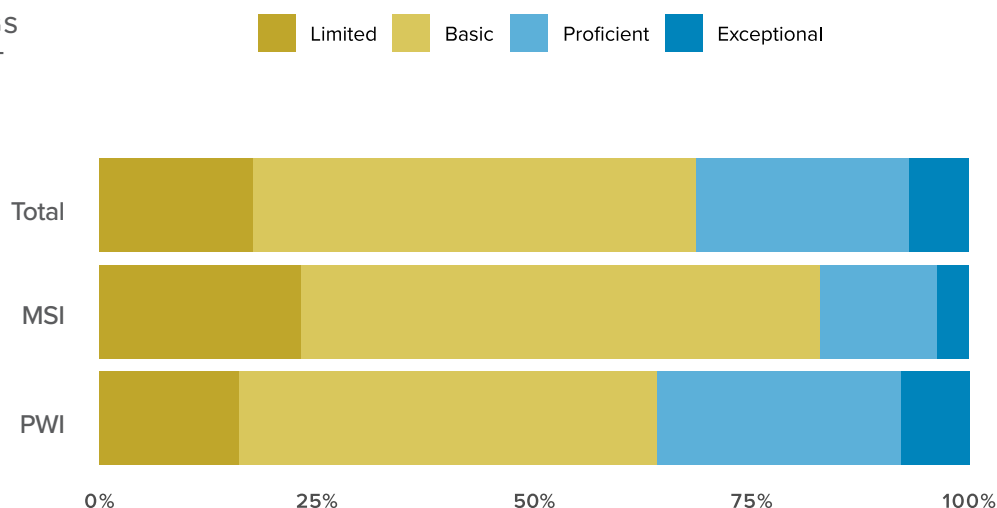
Overall, information about admissions and enrollment found on institutional websites was limited in the extent to which it addressed concerns specific to adult learners. Key findings in this area include:

- **There is considerable room for improvement in the information provided about admissions and enrollment:** About two-thirds of the websites we reviewed were rated as limited (18%) or basic (51%) in this area, with considerably fewer rated as proficient (25%) and exceptional (6%).

- **Websites from PWIs more often received higher ratings than MSIs:** Twenty-eight percent of PWIs were rated at proficient and 8% were rated at exceptional. In comparison, 13% of MSIs were rated at proficient and 4% were rated at exceptional.

Figure 6 presents the distribution of ratings for admissions and enrollment, highlighting key differences by MSI status.

FIGURE 6. DISTRIBUTION OF RATINGS FOR ADMISSIONS AND ENROLLMENT



In the remainder of this section, we describe promising practices for providing information about admissions and enrollment in terms of tailored messaging that explicitly addresses adult learners' needs and access to clear information about deadlines, credit transferability, and contact information.

ADMISSIONS AND ENROLLMENT CRITERIA

- information about admissions specifically tailored to adult learners
- access to and information about how to contact admission counselors
- clearly listed deadlines for application and implications of those deadlines on financial aid
- comprehensive lists of required documents, with convenient options for document submission

Messaging Specific to Adult Learners

Promising Practice: Signaling support via tailored messaging and testimonials.

Strong websites included tailored messaging about admissions and enrollment that explicitly addressed adults' unique needs and concerns, such as balancing multiple responsibilities, financial matters, and career-focused programming. Other institutions also provided testimonial videos or success stories of adult learners of color on admissions and enrollment pages, in addition to their homepage, making it evident that they support adult learners and adult learners of color.

Promising Practice: Providing specific information for different student “profiles.”

In addition to supportive and tailored messaging, a key distinguishing feature was the inclusion of generic student “profiles” that outlined the enrollment processes for different types of learners (e.g., veterans, adult learners, transfer students, justice-impacted individuals) and included an online document submission portal. Special portals for veterans/military and transfer/returning students were more common than portals for adult learners, although some institutions did offer these options. In some cases, linked webpages for different student profiles, like adult learners, included direct links to relevant information and resources, such as specialized scholarships, distance education, transfer credit evaluation, and prior learning assessments.

Access to Information

Promising Practice: Clearly communicating about deadlines and processes

Accessibility to information such as admissions deadlines and guidelines for evaluating transfer credits is critical for adult learners when making enrollment decisions, but only a small share of websites did this well. Some institutions accepted applications on a rolling basis, indicating flexibility in application timelines. However, when websites presented admissions deadlines, it was not always clear how those deadlines were timed relative to financial aid deadlines. The availability of information on the credit transfer process also varied in clarity across different institutions' websites. For example, some websites simply stated that transfer credits were accepted, whereas others provided guidelines on how to assess transferability or even tools that helped learners calculate the possible number of credits they could transfer in.

Promising Practice: Offering options for getting direct support from admissions counselors.

To provide easy access to relevant information and individualized guidance, some institutions offered multiple options to connect one-on-one with admissions counselors (e.g., video conference, live chat, phone calls, and instant messaging). Some colleges also specifically listed contact information for Spanish-speaking admissions counselors or offered program page information in Spanish.

Student Support Services

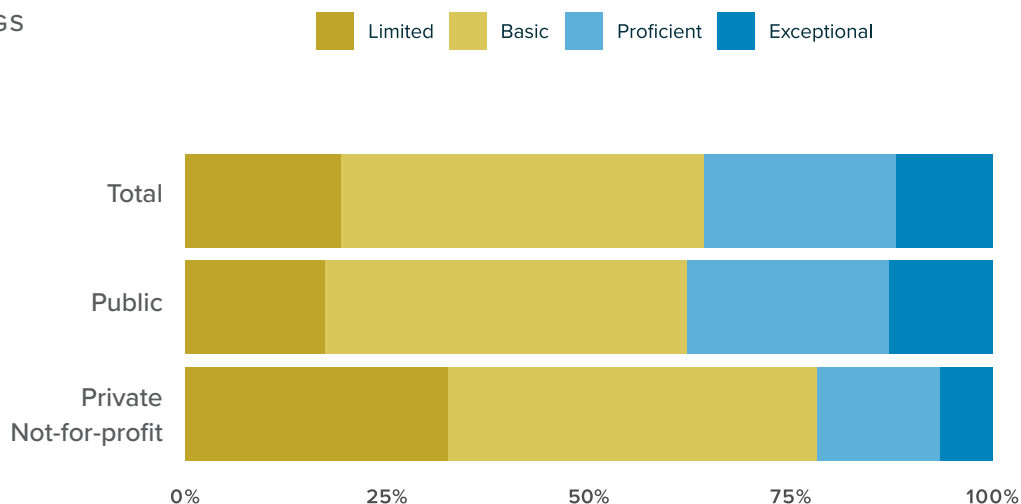
Information about student support services that address the needs and contexts of adult learners of color is another important consideration for adults who are considering (re)enrolling. Overall, we found that:

- **Most websites provided information on at least some types of support services, but fewer went above and beyond:** The majority of the institutions were rated basic (45%) or proficient (24%) for this category. A further 19% were rated limited, with just 12% receiving an exceptional rating.

- **Public institutions' websites received more proficient and exceptional ratings than websites for private institutions:** Forty percent of public 4-year institutions were rated as proficient (32%) and exceptional (8%), and 37% of public 2-year institutions were rated as proficient (24%) and exceptional (37%). In contrast, only 24% of private 4-year institutions received proficient (17%) and exceptional (7%) ratings.

Figure 7 presents the distribution of ratings for student support services, highlighting key differences by institutional control.

FIGURE 7. DISTRIBUTION OF RATINGS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES



In this section, we describe promising practices related to student support services, including information about holistic student support services that address adult learners' specific needs and information about adult-specific, identity-relevant support services.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES CRITERIA

- information about multiple types of adult-relevant student support services, including:
 - transportation services to and from campus or financial support for transportation
 - childcare
 - health and wellness services
 - affinity or identity-based groups
 - student disability services
 - re-entry to college or transition advising
- information about support services that is supportive and tailored to adult learners

Holistic Student Support

Promising Practice: Providing information about services that specifically address common adult learner needs.

Information that effectively addresses adult learners' needs focuses on the robust and comprehensive support services available to ensure their holistic well-being and success. In addition to required services (e.g., academic support, health and wellness, and disability services) many of these more effective websites also provide information about how to access basic needs supports (e.g., food pantry, temporary housing assistance, and clothing closets) and free or discounted resources for childcare and transportation. Information about dedicated departments or services for specific student populations (adult/non-traditional learners, first-generation college students, veterans, and learners of color), although less common, signaled clear support for these learners. Furthermore, many of the highly rated websites provided direct contact information for accessing these services and/or online scheduling options to facilitate ease of access.

On the other hand, websites that were not addressing adult learners' needs as well did not present specialized support options and clear information for adult learners of color, especially regarding childcare and transportation. In addition, on some of these lower-rated websites, certain services require navigation through multiple pages to find relevant information, which can discourage or deter users from finding information that might have supported a decision to (re)enroll. In some cases, the lack of direct contact details or online appointment scheduling tools posed accessibility challenges, and certain services had limited hours of operation that may not be compatible with working adults' schedules.

Adult-Specific, Identity-Relevant Support

Promising Practice: Providing information about dedicated, identity-relevant supports.

Strong websites in this category included information about dedicated departments or services for specific student populations, such as adult/non-traditional learners, first-generation college students, veterans, and students of color, as well as associated landing pages. Certain colleges showcased how they are part of statewide or nationwide networks of specialized programs that support historically underserved populations. Such examples include Umoja, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, Puente, and TRIO. Moreover, some institutions offer support services specifically to adult learners who are parents. These institutions offer a parenting/childcare resource page or an on-site childcare program. To better support adult learners of color, who are balancing many responsibilities, institutions could extend their support services to meet students' various needs inside and outside of the classroom. Creating dedicated webpages for services tailored to specific demographics can foster a sense of belonging in adult learners of color. Finally, accessibility to detailed information and streamlined appointment scheduling processes can facilitate easier access to available services.

Career-Specific Supports

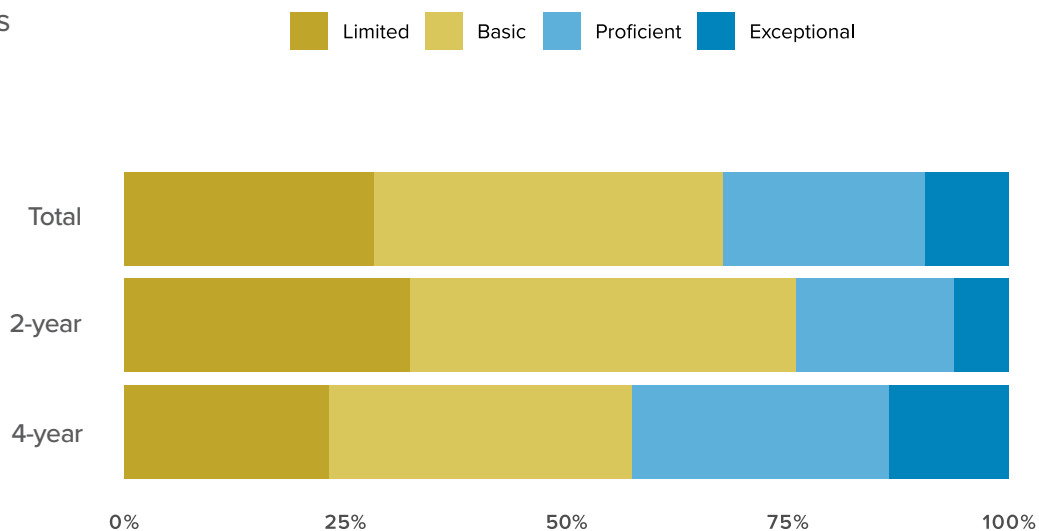
Institutions' websites vary widely in the extent and quality of information about career-specific support offerings. In general, we found that there is substantial room for improvement in the information that is provided on websites related to career specific supports:

- **Most websites had limited information about career-specific supports:** About two-thirds of websites were rated as limited (28%) or basic (39%), with just 23% rated proficient and 10% rated exceptional.

- **Four-year institutions' websites were more likely to include strong information about career-specific supports:** Twenty-nine percent of 4-year institutions' websites were rated proficient (29%) and 14% were rated exceptional, compared to 2-year institution websites' proficient (18%) and exceptional (6%) ratings.

Figure 8 presents the distribution of ratings for career-specific supports, highlighting key differences by institutional level.

FIGURE 8. DISTRIBUTION OF RATINGS FOR CAREER-SPECIFIC SUPPORTS



In the rest of this section, we provide details about promising practices in two areas: information about a wide range of career-specific supports, with details about events, employer partnerships, job placement, and contact information; and easily accessible information that is visible to both prospective and current students.

CAREER SPECIFIC SUPPORTS CRITERIA

- career services available to students including career planning, coaching, resume preparation, and interview preparation
- information about job placement rates or career pathways for different majors or programs of study
- employer partnerships listed for internship opportunities and career placement
- tailored events to support career preparation

Clarity and Comprehensiveness of Information

Promising Practice: Providing comprehensive and specific information.

Many websites in our sample provided relevant sub-headers or embedded links on career services pages to allow users to find more detailed information about a wide range of career-specific supports. Key topics included job placement statistics, employer partnerships, direct contact information for career service staff, specific job training pathways (e.g., apprenticeship and experiential learning opportunities), upcoming events, and online appointment scheduling options. Conversely, websites with less effective information often provided only general overviews of services, such as resume preparation or general office contact information. Some websites also included information about alumni resources beyond students' enrollment periods, signaling a longer term investment in their graduates, which is important to many adult learners considering (re)enrolling. These resources included career counseling, job listings, and networking opportunities.

Accessibility Considerations

Promising Practice: Offering integrated supports.

A commitment to comprehensive support is not just about offering information about a variety of services, but also about making services easily accessible for students. Some websites that rated more highly describe how the institution combines transfer centers and career centers, supporting a smooth transition from academic advising to career services. Similarly, others integrate academic advising and career services, providing a one-stop solution for students' academic and career goals.

Promising Practice: Ensuring prospective learners can access information without login credentials.

Perhaps because career services are considered more relevant to currently enrolled students, we observed variation in the level of accessibility of information about these services on websites in our sample. Some websites provide publicly accessible information on a range of topics on their career services pages to promote service offerings and upcoming events, like a flyer for upcoming career or job fairs with relevant dates, location information, what an individual can anticipate at the event, and a QR code to register. However, it was much more common that this level of detailed information was only available to currently enrolled students by logging in to a secure portal. As a prospective learner, seeing and accessing this type of information may signal that there are further opportunities beyond coursework to prepare for careers.

We also identified a small subset of websites with information accessibility issues specific to career services such as broken website links, sign-in access requirements, or insufficient information. In some cases, job placement statistics were found on the main webpage rather than the career service-specific page, further complicating the process and potentially leading to students missing out on crucial information.

Conclusion & Implications

In this website scan, we sought to understand how institutions' websites address common questions that adult learners of color have when they are considering (re)enrolling in college. Overall, we found that there is room for improvement in terms of how the information that institutions include on their websites addresses those questions. This is especially true in terms of admissions and enrollment and career services. Further, although some websites may be strong in some areas, very few websites are effective in providing the information that most adult learners need across all categories in our framework. **Key takeaways across these categories include:**

- **Website Design:** About half of the websites we reviewed included strong visual representations of their diverse student populations and provided user-friendly website navigation tools, giving prospective learners a positive first impression.
- **Flexible Programming:** The majority of websites provided information about baseline options for flexibility for adult learners, including online course options and accepting transfer credits. Those that went above and beyond provided information about multiple ways learners could take advantage of timing and location flexibility (e.g., shorter term lengths, evening and weekend classes, a mix of online, hybrid, and in-person options). They also offered a range of options for prior learning assessment, beyond accepting transfer credits and exam credits, recognizing the variety of experiences adult learners bring with them to college.
- **Institutional Cost:** In this category, about half of the websites we reviewed provided clear information for learners about the cost of attendance for both full-time and part-time enrollment, with details about non-loan financial aid available to adult learners and learners of color. Websites that had especially strong information provided manipulable tools for learners to calculate the cost of attendance for their unique situations and included supportive messaging about the cost of attendance.
- **Admissions and Enrollment:** We found that there is substantial room for improvement in terms of the information included on websites about admissions and enrollment. This encompasses the instructions for the process, a structured framework to follow, and guidance on inquiry procedures, such as contact information. As with other categories, clear information that is written in a supportive and customized way for adult learners is important in addressing adult learners' questions. In particular, some websites offered "student profiles" (e.g., adult learners, transfer students, veterans) that allowed learners to get information specific to their situation.
- **Student Support Services:** Most websites in our sample provided information on some types of support services, but oftentimes, the information focused on required accommodations and standard academic services, like disability support, tutoring, and academic advising. Although these supports are important for all students, websites that provided information about additional support services that directly address other needs adults may have, including childcare, transportation, and basic needs supports, went further toward addressing common questions adult learners of color have.
- **Career Services:** Most institutions had limited information. Those that were rated highly in this category demonstrated a commitment to transparency in their marketing and the provision of comprehensive overviews of the services they offer.

Moving Forward

Considerations for Practice

Institutions that are interested in better supporting and engaging adult learners, and especially adult learners of color, should consider key takeaways across the categories we explored in this website scan in their communications to adult learners, through institutional websites and other communications and outreach.

Across all categories, we identified several common themes that we argue are promising practices to support adult learners, including providing adult-specific, supportive messaging, providing information and resources that are culturally relevant, and ensuring that information, especially staff contact information, is easily accessible without requiring prospective students to provide their own contact information, log in to a portal, or open numerous tabs to find information on a single topic. In addition, although some areas, like student services and career services, may sometimes be considered more relevant to currently enrolled students, our previous research shows that student support and career services are important information to adult learners who are considering both whether (re)enrolling in college is feasible for them and deciding on a particular institution.

Finally, although the trends we observed in ratings tended to be fairly consistent across most institutional characteristics, our review revealed some differences in ratings by institutional type. In general, MSIs tended to have lower ratings in many categories than PWIs, and we also observed differences in ratings between 2-year and 4-year institutions. Overall, 4-year institutions tended to have higher ratings for most categories, with the exception of flexible program offerings, where 2-year institutions' websites provided stronger information. Although we cannot offer concrete explanations for these differences based solely on public-facing information on websites, these differences may be indicative of underlying structural issues (e.g., historical under-resourcing of MSIs), or differences in institutional mission and student population (e.g., 2-year institutions have historically served more adult learners).

In addition, although our rubric criteria were informed by existing research and in-depth conversations with adult learners, rubric development is inherently subjective; this also may have affected trends in ratings to some extent. Regardless of potential reasons for these differences, it is important to note that an institution's website is only one source of information and may not reflect the entire universe of services offered, nor is it reflective of the full student experience.

Moving Forward

Considerations for Research

This website scan provided important insights into how institutions' websites address the common questions that adult learners of color have when (re)enrolling in postsecondary education. Although websites are often an important first or early point of contact with an institution, the information provided on websites does not necessarily represent the full range of services available to learners, nor does it fully reflect institutional culture and the holistic adult learner experience after (re)enrolling.

Our prior research findings underscore the critical need for institutions to adapt their current approaches to effectively recruit and retain adult learners, particularly adult learners of color. But adult learners experience their institutions in a holistic manner: although individual programs or supports may be helpful to them at a particular point in time, their overall experience at the institution is critical to their sense of belonging and confidence, as well as their experience navigating the college and successfully making enrollment “work with their lives.” For example, adding additional hours for one support service might be useful, but it does not address the fact that other units or faculty with which the learner interacts are not available at the necessary times, sending the signal to learners that the institution is not designed for them.

Still, a barrier to better supporting the overall experience and success of adult learners of color is institution-wide motivation and capacity for advancing institutional change and implementing these practices. Activating deep and pervasive changes at institutions requires multiple units and divisions changing together, making changes to business processes, systems, and curricula (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). Such change leadership and implementation work is challenging, with relatively few success stories and many more examples of failed, stalled, or de-prioritized change initiatives—contributing, in part, to low levels of adoption of evidence-based or best practices (Poole et al., 2023). Evaluating and amplifying effective models for supporting adult learners of color is an important step for research, as is understanding and amplifying learners' voices and experiences.

These contributions, though, are insufficient if these recommended practices or models are not accompanied by guidance for implementation that is responsive to the challenges and demands of organizational change and (dis)incentives. Research examining the factors that contribute to, or hinder, successful implementation—what worked for institutions, why, and how that varies by institutional contexts—is critical for providing valuable guidance for institutions and supporting technical assistance around these approaches. To that end, the next phase of this research will build on this website scan, working directly with postsecondary institutions that have enacted holistic changes to better support adult learners, to develop a deep understanding of their change leadership approaches. We will aim to uncover key learning and tools for other institutions interested in better supporting adult learners.

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