

Best Practices for Marketing to Adult and Non-Traditional Students

October 2018

In the following report, Hanover Research analyzes best practices for marketing to adult and non-traditional students. The report includes an overview of institutions that serve large adult and non-traditional student populations.



Table of Contents

Best Practices for Marketing to Adult and Non-Traditional Students

<u>Executive Summary</u>	<u>Page 3</u>
<u>Research Questions and Methodology</u>	<u>Page 4</u>
<u>Trends in Recruitment and Marketing</u>	<u>Page 5</u>
<u>Overview: Developing a Strategy</u>	<u>Page 7</u>
<u>Showing Awareness</u>	<u>Page 8</u>
<u>Tangible Outcomes</u>	<u>Page 10</u>
<u>Outreach</u>	<u>Page 12</u>
<u>Unique Groups</u>	<u>Page 13</u>

Executive Summary

Best Practices for Marketing to Adult and Non-Traditional Students

Recommendations

- 1 Institutions should market degree programs for adult and non-traditional students by emphasizing flexibility, affordability, and tailored support services.
- 2 Tailored messaging should demonstrate that your institution understands the unique challenges faced by adult students and describe how your institution will help adult students to overcome barriers, graduate, and advance their careers.
- 3 In addition to messages for adult students in general, institutions who wish to recruit non-traditional students should develop targeted messages for specific groups (e.g., military students). In particular, visual depictions and stories will help prospective students envision themselves at your institution.

Key Aspects of Marketing Strategy

Showing Awareness – demonstrate that faculty and staff understand the demographics and needs of adult and non-traditional learners and are committed to supporting them.

Tangible Outcomes – show students a clear path toward graduation. Emphasize flexibility, affordability, and impact on career and self-fulfillment.

Strategic Outreach – anticipate questions and communicate answers tailored to adult students and be readily available to provide information. Easy access to information will lower the obstacles to enrollment.

Unique Audiences – consider unique messaging. Adult students seek tailored messaging that speaks to their unique situations. For example, military students should see different messages than other working professionals.

Key Findings

Marketing to adult students requires different tactics than marketing to traditional students because adult students face unique challenges, have unique concerns, and prefer different channels to gain information.



Adult students rely more on informal channels to learn about colleges compared to traditional students. In part due to time constraints, adult students are less likely to have contact with an admissions representative or guidance counselor. Instead, adult students most commonly rely on family and friends to learn about colleges. TV and other advertisements, and institutional websites, are the next most common methods.

Adult students face specific challenges that traditional students do not usually experience. In particular, they face situational barriers – time constraints, family responsibilities, and financial commitments. They experience dispositional challenges such as feelings of academic inadequacy or not fitting in with younger students. In addition, they often face institutional barriers when policies and services are focused on traditional undergraduate students.



The most effective messages will be tailored to adult students, acknowledging their unique challenges and offering empathy, support, and solutions. Marketing materials should emphasize that the institution understands that adult students have many commitments besides classes and offer solutions to help them manage time and financial resources. Similarly, institutions should encourage adults students to envision themselves as successful students and professionals, and provide clear pathways and examples of tangible positive outcomes.

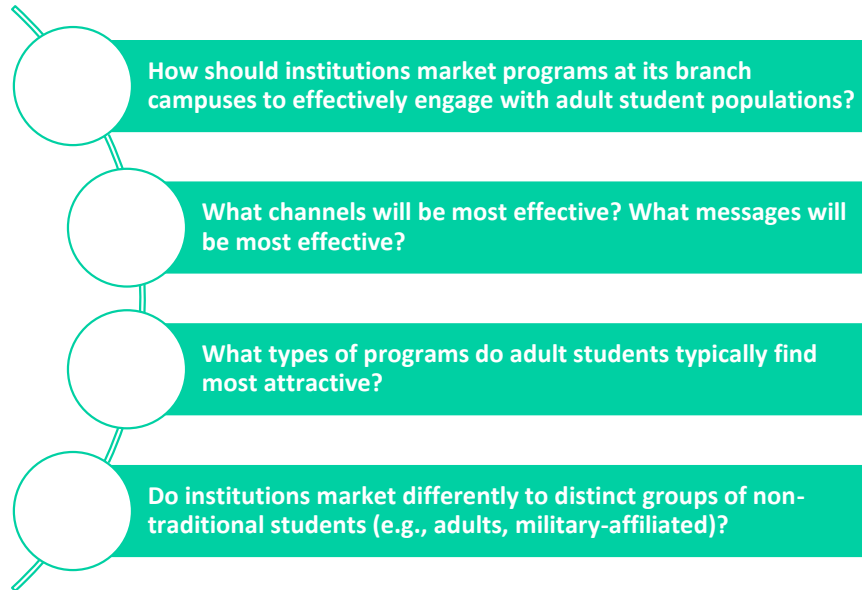
Institutions often market differently to distinct groups, such as military students or Hispanic students. Although the general messages remain similar for all adult students, using visual depictions and stories targeted at specific groups can help alleviate some common adult student concerns.



Research Questions and Methodology

Best Practices for Marketing to Adult and Non-Traditional Students

Research Questions



Methodology

To help institutions better understand best practices for marketing to adult and non-traditional students, Hanover conducted a qualitative review of relevant secondary literature and identified postsecondary institutions that have successfully developed adult marketing and messaging strategies catering to adult and non-traditional learners. The analysis aims to help institutions increase non-traditional student enrollment by identifying effective marketing strategies for this target audience.

Institutions Analyzed



The report includes examples of marketing messaging and channels from several U.S. institutions that emphasize adult and non-traditional student programs and services. Across a variety of institutions, (including large public institutions, primarily online institutions, two-year colleges, and liberal arts colleges), similar themes emerge regarding how to attract and support adult and non-traditional students. The following institutions (several of which received favorable mentions in media or academic research on account of their focus on adult students) are referenced in the following analysis :

- Brandman University
- Charter Oak State College
- Monroe Community College
- Norwich University
- Northeastern Illinois University
- Rio Salado Community College
- Saint Mary's University of Minnesota
- Southern New Hampshire University
- University of Maryland
- University of Memphis

Key Sources



As the number of adult and non-traditional students grows, educational researchers and non-profit organizations have become increasingly interested in how institutions of higher education address the needs and demands of adult and non-traditional students. Key sources for Hanover's analysis come from the follow organizations:

- Education Writers Association (EWA)
- Educational Marketing Group (EMG)
- Higher Education Insights/Lumina Foundation (HEI)
- Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR)
- National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)
- National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
- Public Agenda

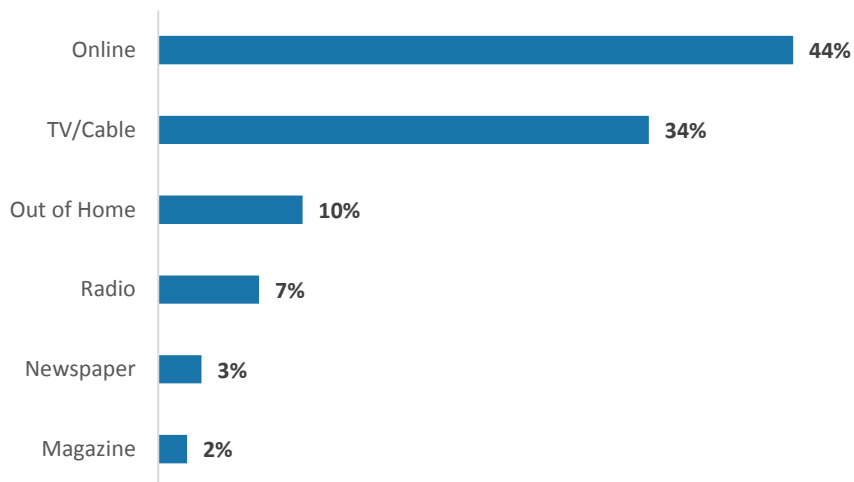
Trends in Recruitment and Marketing

Best Practices for Marketing to Adult and Non-Traditional Students

Higher Education Marketing

Marketing expenditures in higher education have increased rapidly, and some institutions have successfully recruited adult students with targeted messages.

One recent study found that institutional spending on advertising rose from \$1.3 billion in 2013 to \$1.6 billion in 2016. Online and TV are by far the most common advertising channels, although some institutions continue to use radio and print marketing as well ([EMG](#)). Media with targeted messaging is likely to be the most effective tactic for attracting adult students, and for-profit institutions have been successful at using this method. Web portals and similar online tools can be useful if positioned to appear at the top of online search results ([HEI](#)).



Source: [EMG](#)



The National Association for College Admission Counseling found that 88 percent of surveyed institutions consider “contacting students through emails and engaging them through the institution’s website” as “the most important recruitment strategies” across different student groups ([NACAC](#)).

Tools Students Use

Adult students “obtain information about colleges from family, friends, community groups, and colleagues rather than from more official sources.”

[HEI](#) found that typical recruiting methods are less effective for recruiting adults students because they gather information about colleges differently than traditional students. For example, a survey from the non-profit organization [Public Agenda](#) found that personal networks, advertisements, and institutional websites were the most common sources used. Older students were much less likely to use multiple sources, especially professional recruiters or advisors.



Source: [Public Agenda](#)



Institutional websites are important sources of information. Students favor quick information on academic programs, tuition cost, available scholarships, and the admission and enrollment process.

Trends in Recruitment and Marketing

Best Practices for Marketing to Adult and Non-Traditional Students

Different Messages for Different Students

As the number of adult and non-traditional students grows, it is increasingly important to develop customized messaging to attract these students.

The National Center for Education Statistics anticipates adult enrollment (25 years and older) will grow at a higher percentage than their traditional peers over the next decade (NCES). In fact, observers have already referred to current times as “a real moment for the adult student.”



However, “typical college recruiting methods are less effective with adult students” (EWA). Recruiting adult students is more effective when an institution acknowledges the unique circumstances of these student groups. For example, an institution should communicate awareness of the specific challenges faced by adult students and advertise the ways the institution can help meet these challenges.

In particular, adult and non-traditional students usually face three barriers:

Situational	Dispositional	Institutional
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time constraints and high cost of attendance, including tuition and fees, child care, transportation, and health-related expenses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instances in which adult learners have feelings of stress, anxiety, guilt, or exclusion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incompatibilities of the system with the realities faced by adult students.

Source: NASPA.

Adult Student Perspectives

What degree or program?



The abundance of available programs can be overwhelming, especially for students who may not have been in school for several years.

An institution can help by providing a **clear overview** of available degree-awarding programs and certifications, as well as **readmission/reentry programs**. Equally important are clear answers to admissions questions (HEI).

How to manage being a student?



Adult learners often have multiple personal, professional, and financial commitments beyond their academic responsibilities. While cost is usually a primary concern, managing time is also a potential challenge.

Flexibility and affordability are key messages to emphasize in marketing to these students. An institution should highlight financial aid options and provide **clear information** on class schedules, program length, transferable credits, and delivery formats. These types of information allow adult students to understand how they can balance competing commitments (College Insights).

Why enroll?



Adult students often enroll in college to prepare and improve **career opportunities**. Institutions should inform prospective students about tangible outcomes and include data on alumni success, job placements, and networking options (College Insights).

In addition to learning job-relevant skills, the “**narrative of personal transformation**” becomes increasingly relevant among adult learners (NPR).

Overview of Marketing Strategy

There are four key aspects for a marketing strategy aimed at recruiting adult and non-traditional students – showing awareness, demonstrating positive and tangible outcomes, targeted outreach, and acknowledging unique student groups. Hanover explores each of these aspects in detail on subsequent pages.



Showing Awareness

Institutions' messaging should demonstrate that faculty and staff understand the demographics and needs of adult and non-traditional learners and are committed to supporting them. Institutions' public image should project an understanding of students' aspirations and concerns and convey a readiness to help them achieve their goals.

Pages 8-9



Tangible Outcomes

Institutions' marketing materials should show students a clear path toward graduation. Adult and non-traditional students want to know that they can complete a degree and that their investment will pay off professionally and personally. Institutions should emphasize flexibility, affordability, and impact.

Pages 10-11



Strategic Outreach

Institutions should be proactive and persistent in their outreach efforts. Anticipate questions, communicate answers tailored to adult and non-traditional students, and be readily available to provide more information when needed. These students have many commitments and need easy access to information to lower the obstacles to enrollment.

Page 12



Unique Audiences

Institutions should consider individual marketing campaigns for different non-traditional students – specific campaigns for specific groups. Adult and non-traditional students seek more tailored messaging based on their unique circumstances. For example, military students should be recruited through different campaigns than other working professionals.

Page 13



Understanding Students and Challenges

Institutions seeking to recruit adult students recognize the demographic and financial characteristics of adult students, as well as the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers they might be facing.

In 2018, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) published a briefing paper on the characteristics of what it calls “independent students.” IWPR recommends several strategies to support the postsecondary success of the “new college majority,” including the promotion of “racial and ethnic equity in college attainment,” improved data on student outcomes, more financial aid, and interventions to ensure the success of part-time students ([IWPR](#)).



The average adult student is female, 29 years old, more likely non-white, a parent of children younger than 18, living at or below 200 percent of the poverty threshold, likely to spend more than 20 hours per week caring for dependents, and more than twice as likely to enroll in college part time ([IWPR](#)).

Non-traditional students have one or more of the following characteristics:



- at least 24 years old;
- married;
- a graduate or professional student;
- a veteran or member of the armed forces;
- an orphan, in foster care, or dependent or ward of the court since age 13;
- has legal dependents other than a spouse;
- an emancipated minor; or
- homeless or at risk of becoming homeless ([IWPR](#)).

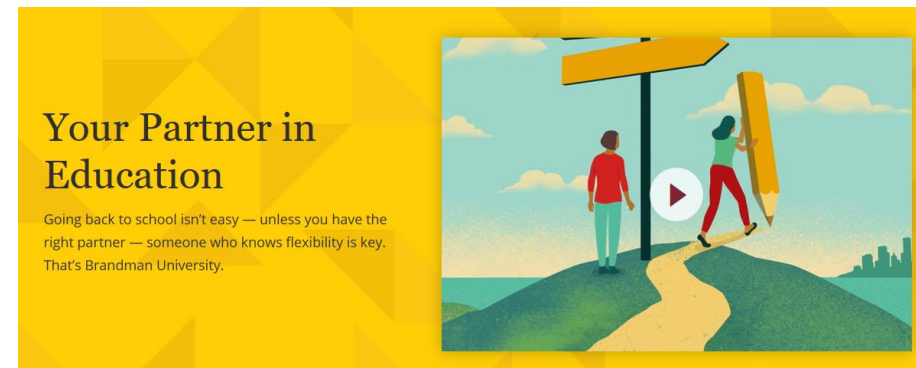
Empathizing with Students

Adult students may be apprehensive about enrolling or returning to college. They may be concerned about attending classes with younger or more adept students or be worried about balancing their many competing responsibilities.

Addressing financial, logistical, and psychological concerns can help to improve the impact of a marketing campaign. Institutions should acknowledge that prospective adult students are worried about the financial and time commitment in addition to concerns about academic abilities and feeling out of place ([Kuhne](#)).

[Brandman University](#) addressed these issues in a succinct message combining an acknowledgment of possible difficulties, a promise of flexibility, and an offer of partnership: **“Going back to school isn’t easy – unless you have the right partner – someone who knows flexibility is key. That’s Brandman University.”**

Brandman University pairs this message with a 30-second animated film. The clip shows a woman who finds herself at a crossroads. Visibly overwhelmed by the abundance of possible directions she could go, she is helped by another woman who removes one of the signposts and transforms it into a pencil. The initially “lost” woman can now draw a bridge connecting to a city ([Brandman](#)).





Increased Visibility for Adult Students

Institutions seeking to recruit from a variety of adult and non-traditional students demographics should emphasize visible representations of adult and non-traditional students in marketing materials ([NASPA](#)).

For example, [Rio Salado Community College](#)'s website clearly states who might benefit from its programs (e.g., "[the College] help[s] students who did not complete high schools, as well as high school graduates who need to brush up on their basic academic skills") and shows images of a diverse group of adult students.

Adult Education

Rio Salado College has been offering in-person adult education classes since 1978 and is the largest provider in Arizona. Adult education classes help students who did not complete high school, as well as high school graduates who need to brush up on their basic academic skills. Adult education also serves students whose first language is not English.



Source: [Rio Salado](#)

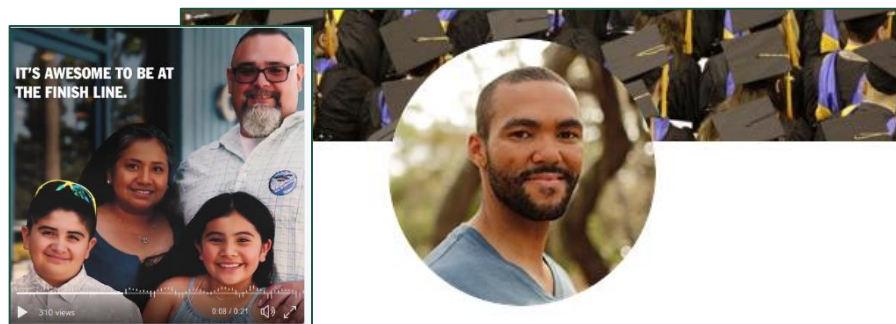
Contextualization

The Boston-based web design firm *OHO Interactive* "discovered that adult learners do not tend to like imagining themselves in the classroom."

The firm suggested that adult learners would respond "more positively to photography that shows them in the career role that they will have after they graduate" ([OHO](#)). In fact, several of the institutions referenced in this report usually show photos of adult students with families, at graduation, or in career roles, rather than in the classroom.

Identifying with Students

NASPA mentions Southern New Hampshire University as a good example of how to build a profile as an adult learner-oriented institution while attracting diverse types of students. NASPA emphasizes the importance of testimonials from students and alumni who have a range of backgrounds and degree focuses ([NASPA](#)).



"I went back to school because I wanted more for my career and my family. This degree has opened doors...This moment is huge for us."

Steven, Class of 2016

[Read their stories](#)

Source: [SNHU](#)



Michael Leathers

BS Criminal Justice - Legal Studies & Advocacy

"SNHU has academic advisors with military experience. That's extremely helpful, because these folks know what it's like."

I joined the military right out of high school. After almost 20 years in the service, my military career is coming to an end. I want to continue serving my country in law enforcement, so getting a college education would help out with opportunities for employment.

[Learn More About the BS Criminal Justice - Legal Studies & Advocacy](#)

Source: [SNHU](#)



Clear Pathways to Graduation

Adult students have many competing responsibilities, and institutions should anticipate their concerns and provide solutions for scheduling and balancing personal life, work, and school.

Tying these messages to profiles of successful alumni helps prospective students visualize a tangible path through college. [Norwich University](#) provides one of the best reviewed examples of how to emphasize this message. Alumni profiles (below) are advertised alongside a “Week in the Life” visualization tool (right).

Thriving in Work, School, and Life

Are you considering a program at Norwich University but wonder what it would be like to be a student here? Meet three recent Norwich alumni and learn what their typical week looks like. Click on a day of the week, and see how they find time for work, school and life. You’ll be amazed at how you can get it all done.



Michael Mallery
Contracts manager working in construction management and liaison with state agencies



Kim Swasey
Retired from the military and now working as a contractor for the government



Stephan Liapis
I work for a private, non-profit organization, assisting around 350 youth per year

Michael Mallery

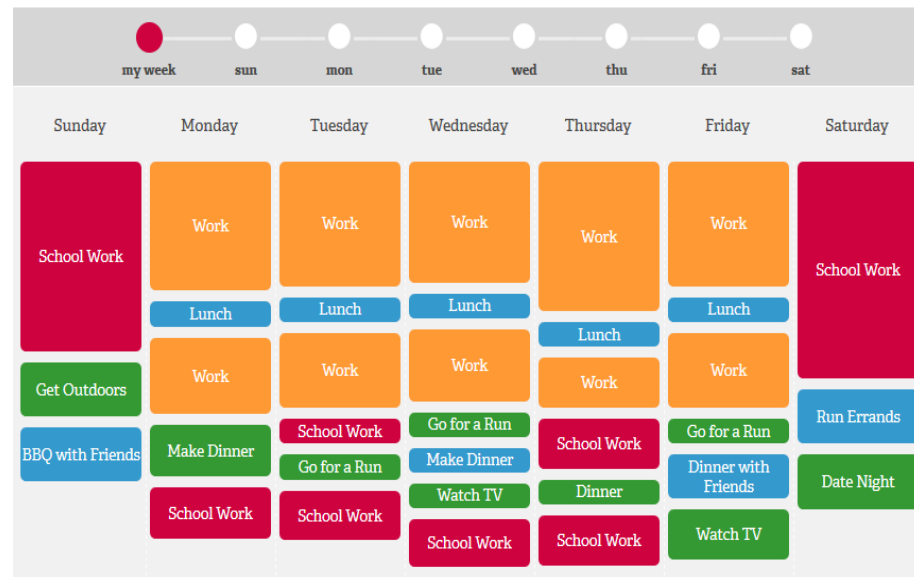
My background
I work in construction management as a contracts manager. I work with a lot of state agencies that require a general level of diplomacy, which is about getting people with different motives working towards a shared goal.

Why I chose Norwich
I decided to get my master’s degree so that I could keep my career options open. I chose diplomacy because I thought that the transferable skills of conflict negotiation, clear communication, and leadership can be used in any career path.



During the program, I got married, moved for a job and we adopted a puppy. Life has been moving fast, but it has been wonderful!

Source: [Norwich](#)



Monday

6 AM **Work** - I am at work and responding to emails, making phone calls and setting up meetings about a new contract that we just received.

12 PM **Lunch** - Stop working for a quick bite.

1 PM **Work** - Work until 4 PM, then wrap up and head home.

6 PM **Make Dinner** - Take a break from school work to make dinner before my wife comes home. When she gets home at 7 PM, we'll sit down and catch up on each other's day.

8 PM **School Work** - I finish up with the required reading for the week and make a few summary notes. Tomorrow our professor will be posting a topic for a group project. I wrap things up and head to bed about 11 PM.

Source: [Norwich](#)



Supporting Degree Completion

Several institutions that recruit adult and non-traditional students focus on helping students to complete a bachelor's degree. These institutions point to the support services that help ensure graduation and emphasize opportunities to easily transfer past credits.

For example, the [University of Memphis](#)' Finish Line Program helped the institution increase enrollment of adult students by offering scholarships and by hiring "completion concierges," advisers "whose job is to find students 'the clearest, shortest, most efficient path to a degree'" ([Chronicle of Higher Education](#)). The program recruits individuals who "have completed 90 or more credit hours but have regrettably had to abandon their dreams of completing a college degree" ([Memphis](#)). According to University officials, the campaign benefitted from messaging to students about what had changed at the institution since they were last enrolled ([Chronicle of Higher Education](#)).

Charter Oak State College has designed its programming around students who return to college to finish their degrees. One key message that Charter Oak stresses is that it "make[s] it easy to transfer in credit you've already earned from other regionally accredited colleges and universities" ([Charter Oak](#)).



"Getting a job interview is much easier now. I hadn't worked in years. I was a stay at home mom for 14.5 years before I enrolled in Finish Line. No one was trying to hire or interview me before I graduated. I'm so excited! Thinking about getting a Master's degree is no longer a thought. I'm about to make it happen. That Doctorate degree isn't too far away either." --Sharon Green, Finish Line Graduate

Source: [Memphis](#)

Connecting to Careers

Institutions seeking to recruit adult students should show clear connections between degrees and career opportunities. Many students want to improve their careers but may not be aware of what skills, training, or degrees are in demand in their city or region.

Southern New Hampshire University appeals to professional students who might be worried about or dissatisfied with their current employment but need assistance in finding appropriate educational and training opportunities.

54% OF EMPLOYEES FEAR THEY'LL FALL BEHIND.

WE CAN HELP.

LEARN MORE

Southern New Hampshire University

Source: [Moat](#)

33% OF EMPLOYEES FEEL STUCK.

WE CAN HELP.

LEARN MORE

Southern New Hampshire University



[Monroe Community College](#) in Rochester, New York, has developed a number of user-friendly tools that show [regional workforce clusters](#) and available educational and training opportunities ([LadderzUP](#)). Individuals who would like to receive more information can fill out an online form. These types of tangible employment opportunities can help adult students visualize the outcomes of enrollment and graduation.



Communication Channels

Electronic outreach methods such as email and social media are more cost-effective than other marketing channels ([HEI](#)).

In addition to institutional websites and traditional advertisements, electronic outreach campaigns can help inform prospective students about available programs, cost, and other relevant facts. For example, [Saint Mary's University of Minnesota](#) uses a variety of strategies to recruit adult learners, such as personalized emails differentiating between general information, specific response to inquiry, or follow-up on started application:

	
Dear Jim, How will this fit into your life? Our courses are designed for busy people like you. Evenings, online, or a blend of classes make it convenient for you to fit into your schedule. This is a big step! I'm here to help. Sincerely, Mnlv	Dear Jim, I am happy you have inquired to Saint Mary's about our programs , and would like to connect to answer any of your questions. Let's get you started on your path to success! Warm regards, Dr. Tom Marpe

While such campaigns can be effective at an initial outreach stage, communication becomes even more critical once a student has enrolled in a program. Recent surveys show that institutional responsiveness is key to adult learners' persistence and graduation ([NASPA](#)).

Meeting with Prospective Students

Institutions should offer flexible options to establish personal contact with adult students. These students often have responsibilities that prevent them from attending fairs, open houses, and similar events.

In view of the busy schedules of prospective adult students, institutions should develop alternative strategies to make personal connections and inform students about degree programs and support services. For instance, [Harper College](#) provides a sign-up form to register for an information session.

Information Session

RSVP for an Adult Information Session

Whether this is the first time you will set foot on a college campus, or you are returning to college after an extended absence, we understand adult learners have concerns and questions that differ from traditional college students.

Therefore, we encourage you to attend an adult student information session. An Admissions Specialist will share brief, but helpful information regarding academic programs, areas of study, financial aid, and campus resources available to help you achieve your goals.

Please note: This session is intended for students NEW to Harper College. If you are a current or prior student we encourage you to contact the Student Development office at 847-925-6393 to speak with an academic adviser.

Schedule an appointment *

- Wednesday, September 19 at 6 p.m., Building W, Room 219
- I am unable to attend, please contact me to schedule an individual appointment.

Source: [Harper](#)

Tennessee Tech University recruits military students by going to them – TTU sends representatives to the Quad A (Army Aviation Association of America) annual meeting, which “reaches over 8000 Army Aviators and military professionals throughout the United States. This allows TTU to directly provide information, advisors, and financial aid information to military personnel” ([TTU](#)).



Unique Groups of Non-Traditional Students

Best Practices for Marketing to Adult and Non-Traditional Students

Creating Tailored Campaigns

While availability of programs, flexibility, and affordability are important to most non-traditional students, institutions should also consider using unique messages to attract specific student groups.

For example, active servicemembers require a particularly high degree of flexibility and mobility. Institutions like the University of Maryland University College (profiled to the right) offer online and hybrid courses. Moreover, veterans expect assistance in transitioning back into civilian life.

Similarly, Hispanic students often report feeling out of place or unprepared, but institutions such as Fullerton University and Lehman College have provided additional support and enroll large number of Hispanic students ([EWA](#)). [Northeastern Illinois University](#) integrates students' experiences in their web presentations (using similar strategies as apply to all adult students).



NEWS & FEATURES

A mission for education

Oscar Ramírez never had a Latino teacher growing up. Not in grade school, not in middle school and not in high school. *Nunca.*

That all changed when Ramírez, the son of Guatemalan immigrants, enrolled at Northeastern Illinois University. "I suddenly had Latino teachers," Ramírez said. "I would visit my professors during office hours and talk to them. They opened my mind and made me believe I can do anything."

Source: [NIU](#)



Spotlight: Recruiting Military Students (University of Maryland University College)

The University of Maryland University College is one of the "most innovative colleges for adult learners" ([WashMonthly](#)) and offers over 90 programs and specializations via online and hybrid courses ([UMUC](#)). The institution has historically recruited among servicemembers and veterans, recently implemented targeted initiatives such as the [MIL-VET Checkpoint](#) or the [Veterans Assistance Fund](#).

UMUC's website prominently advertises a connection between the institution and military servicemen and veterans:

"Study wherever service takes you."



"Our staff specializes in helping military and veteran students get started with education benefits."

"Earn credit for military experience and training." ([UMUC](#))



Military History That Continues Today

Serving our military servicemembers and veterans is in our DNA.

UMUC salutes our **#militaryheroes**

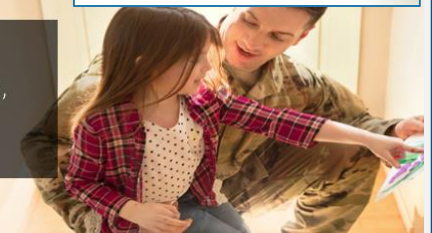
This National Military Appreciation Month, share a story about who inspires you.

[READ OUR HEROES' STORIES](#)

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UMUC for Military Servicemembers, Veterans, and Families

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