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2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report
With results from four-year and two-year institutions

Study conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz and CAEL

The 2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report examines key findings for adult learners, including:

- Trends in adult learner satisfaction and their likelihood to recommend their program to others.
- Which factors contributed to the adult learner's decision to enroll.
- Aspects of the student experience that matter to adult learners, grouped into clusters of related items.
- A closer look at the items within those clusters, with identification of strengths and challenges from the student perspective.

For additional satisfaction-priorities reports for traditional and nontraditional students, visit **www.RuffaloNL.com/Benchmark**

About the study and the survey instrument

These results come from the Adult Learner Inventory™ (ALI), an assessment instrument completed by students while they are currently enrolled at an institution. One group represents 23,185 students from 65 four-year private and public institutions that completed the ALI between the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2015. A second group reflects 9,131 students from 35 community colleges who completed the ALI during the same time frame.

Trend review of satisfaction and recommendation scores

Adult students in general are more satisfied with their experience than traditional-age students, even with satisfaction scores dropping in more recent years. The levels of satisfaction between adult students at community colleges and four-year institutions are fairly comparable. Adult learners at four-year institutions and community colleges continue to be more likely to recommend their program to others at levels that are higher than their satisfaction responses. The indication that adult learners would recommend the program to others is a confirmation that most students feel satisfied with their experience.

Figure 1: Four-year institution satisfaction and recommendation scores
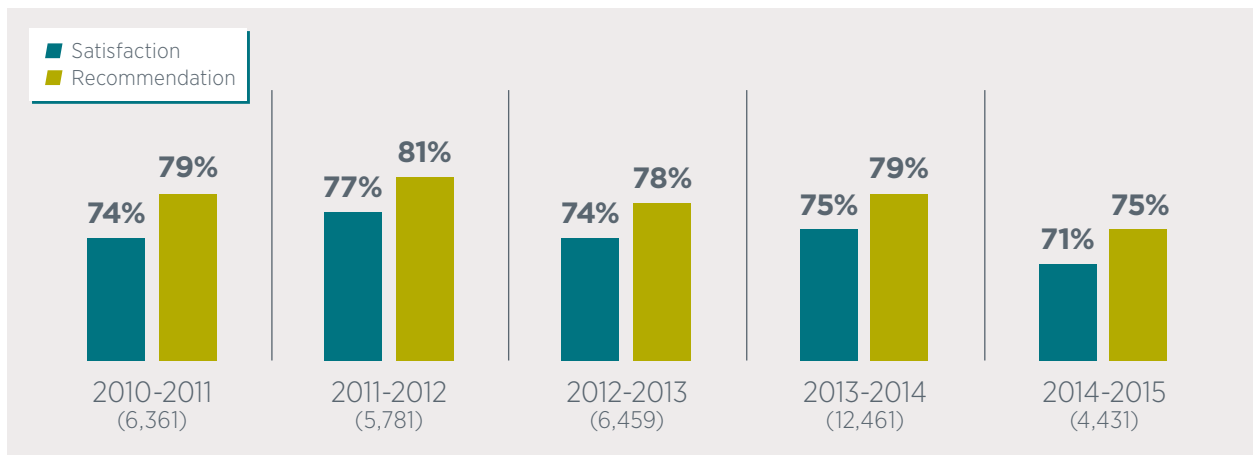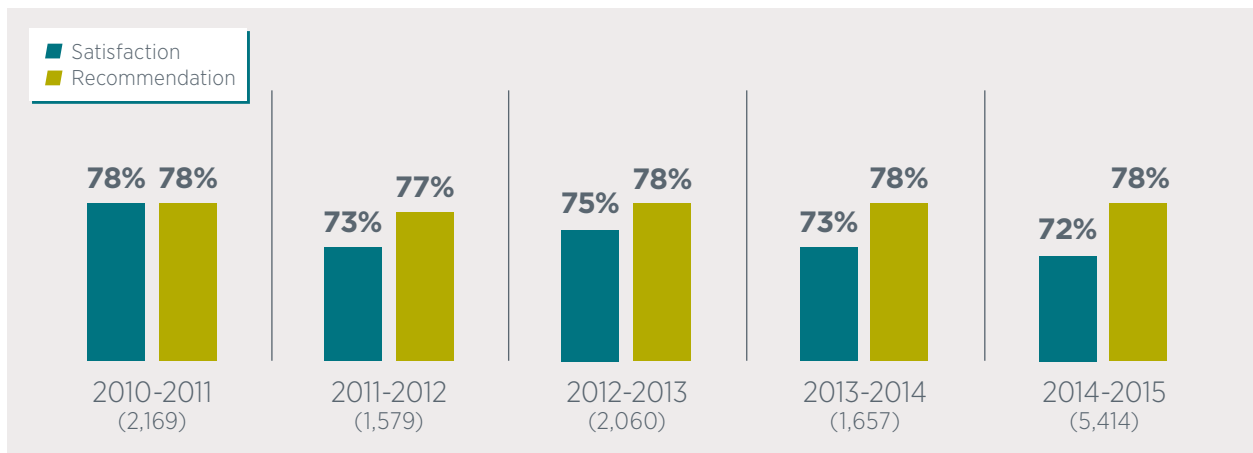### (number of students surveyed is in parentheses)

	Satisfaction	Recommendation
2010-2011 (6,361)	74%	79%
2011-2012 (5,781)	77%	81%
2012-2013 (6,459)	74%	78%
2013-2014 (12,461)	75%	79%
2014-2015 (4,431)	71%	75%

Figure 2: Community college satisfaction and recommendation
(number of students surveyed is in parentheses)

	Satisfaction	Recommendation
2010-2011 (2,169)	78%	78%
2011-2012 (1,579)	73%	77%
2012-2013 (2,060)	75%	78%
2013-2014 (1,657)	73%	78%
2014-2015 (5,414)	72%	78%

Enrollment factors for adult learners

Why do adult learners decide to enroll at the participating four-year and two-year institutions? Here are the factors they cited, in descending order of importance.

Table 1: Enrollment factors for adult learners at four-year institutions

Factor	Importance %
Availability of program I wanted	93%
Convenient time and place for classes	92%
Flexible pacing for completing a program	88%
Time required to complete program	88%
Availability of financial assistance	86%
Ability to transfer credits	85%
Requirement for current or future job	85%
Cost	84%
Reputation of institution	83%
Availability of online courses	80%
High rate of job placement	79%
Program accreditation by professional organization or trade group	78%
Credit for learning gained from life and work	76%
Distance from campus	74%
Tuition reimbursement from employer	72%
Ability to design my own program	68%
Employer endorsement	52%
Courses held at employment site	37%
Labor union support/endorsement	36%
Availability of child care	34%

Table 2: Enrollment factors for adult learners at community colleges

Factor	Importance %
Availability of program I wanted	89%
Convenient time and place for classes	88%
Cost	86%
Requirement for current or future job	85%
Availability of financial assistance	82%
Flexible pacing for completing a program	81%
Time required to complete program	81%
Ability to transfer credits	79%
Distance from campus	78%
High rate of job placement	75%
Reputation of institution	74%
Availability of online courses	73%
Program accreditation by professional organization or trade group	72%
Credit for learning gained from life and work	68%
Ability to design my own program	66%
Tuition reimbursement from employer	63%
Employer endorsement	49%
Courses held at employment site	44%
Availability of child care	43%
Labor union support/endorsement	40%

Not surprisingly, the availability of programs and convenient time and place for courses are the driving factors for adult learner enrollment at both four-year and two-year institutions. Cost and distance to campus have higher importance to students enrolled at community colleges, while flexible pacing and time required to complete the program rate higher in the rankings for adult students at four-year institutions.

It is also important to note that many of these factors have levels of importance exceeding 60 percent. When institutions are recruiting adult students, messages that touch on the majority of these factors should be included to attract new students to the program.

How to read the results on the following tables

On the Adult Learner Inventory, students respond to statements of expectation with an importance rating and a satisfaction rating. These ratings are on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being high. The student responses are averaged to produce an importance score and a satisfaction score for each item.

A **performance gap** is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score.

- Larger performance gaps indicate areas where the institution is not meeting student expectations.
- Smaller performance gaps indicate areas where the institution is doing a relatively good job of meeting student expectations.

This two-tiered assessment also highlights strengths and challenges:

STRENGTHS	CHALLENGES
High importance	High importance
High satisfaction	Low satisfaction or high performance gap
Items to celebrate as benefits for enrolling at the institution	Priority areas where the institution should direct its focus for improvements

When looking at national results from adult learners, strengths are highlighted in green text, while challenges are reflected by red text. Items between a strength and a challenge are in black. Note that strengths and challenges are relative to the institution type. What may be a challenge or a strength for one campus type may not be a strength or a challenge for another, even if the importance, satisfaction, and gap scores are identical.

The percentages reflect the students who indicated that the item was important or very important to them (answer 6 or 7 on the 7-point range) and the percentage that said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the item (again, answers 6 or 7).

Satisfaction and importance for key areas of the adult learner experience

Outreach: Adult learners place a high value on course flexibility

The cluster of items in the Outreach scale assess the way that the institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities. This area is of top importance to adult learners. The items below contribute to the Outreach scale, with the items of strength noted in green and the items of challenge noted in red.

Table 3: Outreach

Item	FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS			COMMUNITY COLLEGES		
	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap
My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.	93%	64%	29%	91%	64%	27%
I am able to choose course delivery that fits my life circumstances.	90%	61%	29%	90%	68%	22%
I am able to obtain information I need by phone, fax, email, or online.	90%	79%	11%	89%	77%	12%
I receive the help I need to stay on track with my program of study.	89%	65%	24%	88%	66%	22%
Processes and procedures for enrolling here are convenient.	88%	75%	13%	88%	75%	13%
I receive the help I need to make decisions about courses and programs that interest me.	88%	65%	23%	86%	64%	22%
Staff are available to help me solve unique problems I encounter.	85%	66%	19%	85%	65%	20%

Adult learners place a high priority on course flexibility. They want courses to fit with their life and work schedules and options when it comes to course delivery. This should not surprise anyone when it comes to working with adult learners, but the data indicate that there is still room for improvement here, especially at four-year institutions. The good news in this area is that students gave positive ratings for the ability to obtain necessary information and convenient processes for enrollment, with both areas identified as strengths at both institution types.

Life and Career Planning: Adult learners want more course offerings in their program of study

The Life and Career Planning scale assesses how the institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals at the onset of enrollment. This helps the institution assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals. These items have the largest performance gap for both four-year institutions and community colleges, and the most room for improvement based on perceptions of adult learners.

Table 4: Life and Career Planning

Item	FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS			COMMUNITY COLLEGES		
	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap
Advisors are knowledgeable about requirements for courses and programs of interest to me.	91%	69%	22%	89%	65%	24%
Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.	90%	55%	35%	89%	54%	35%
This institution provides students with the help they need to develop an education plan.	87%	66%	21%	86%	64%	22%
I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experiences.	83%	51%	32%	79%	47%	32%
Mentors are available to guide my career and life goals.	75%	51%	24%	77%	54%	23%

For four-year institutions, only one item appears as a challenge in this cluster because the other items are lower in importance and didn't qualify as challenges. However, satisfaction scores are notably low for these items at both four-year and two-year institutions. The challenge item calls attention to adult students looking for more options in the courses that are available for them each term. This is an issue across higher education for traditional-age students as well as adult learners. Community college adult learners also identify this issue as a challenge.

Advisor knowledgeability is also identified as a challenge by community college students, while it is perceived as a strength at four-year institutions. Community colleges often have more room for improvement when it comes to advising. By being attentive to course offerings and working with advisors to appropriately guide students through the process, institutions can be more student-focused in their services.

Financing: Adult learners need options for billing and adequate information about financial assistance

The Financing scale assesses the way the institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.

Table 5: Financing

Item	FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS			COMMUNITY COLLEGES		
	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap
This institution assists students who need help with the financial aid process.	84%	65%	19%	84%	67%	17%
Billing for tuition and fees is tailored to meet my specific needs.	84%	57%	27%	84%	62%	22%
I can make payments or inquiries about tuition at times that are convenient for me.	84%	67%	17%	83%	69%	14%
I receive adequate information about sources of financial assistance available to me.	83%	53%	30%	84%	56%	28%

Adult learners at four-year and two-year institutions identify different priorities for improvement. Students at community colleges prioritize having adequate information on sources of financial assistance, and while this item has a lower satisfaction score and larger performance gap at four-year institutions, it did not qualify as being in the top half of items of importance, so it is not a red-flag challenge. At four-year institutions, adult learners prioritize tuition billing that is tailored for their needs. Addressing financial issues, including options for financial assistance and flexible billing, are key ways that institutions serving adult learners can help students to overcome barriers.

Teaching-Learning Process: Adult learners show high satisfaction with instruction, but want more timely feedback

The Teaching-Learning Process scale assesses how the institution's faculty use multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills. This cluster of items has the greatest number of perceived strengths.

Table 6: Teaching-Learning Process

Item	FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS			COMMUNITY COLLEGES		
	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap
I have a clear understanding of what I'm expected to learn in my classes.	93%	73%	20%	93%	75%	18%
My instructors provide timely feed-back about my academic progress.	92%	62%	30%	91%	67%	24%
The learning experiences within my program of study challenge me to reach beyond what I know already.	90%	77%	13%	88%	76%	12%
My instructors respect student opinions and ideas that differ from their own.	87%	72%	15%	85%	70%	15%
The frequency of interactions with my instructors is satisfactory.	86%	72%	14%	87%	74%	13%
Most instructors use a variety of teaching methods.	79%	62%	17%	81%	65%	16%
Instructors incorporate my life and work experiences in class activities and assignments.	74%	58%	16%	71%	54%	17%
My instructors encourage student-to-student interactions through a variety of techniques.	66%	65%	1%	68%	66%	2%

Adult learners' priority on receiving timely feedback is consistent at community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. This is also a priority area for traditional-age students. The perceived strengths in the teaching-learning cluster are consistent between students enrolled at two-year and four-year institutions: students feel positive about what they are expected to learn, are challenged, and have the appropriate frequency of interactions. Institutions have opportunities to celebrate these strengths with their faculty while also encouraging more timely feedback on student progress during the course.

How can colleges and universities better serve adult learners?

This is a question that both Ruffalo Noel Levitz and CAEL (the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) address with their assessments and strategies for adult learners. And while there is no one-size-fits all approach to something as diverse as higher education for adult learners, CAEL has provided institutions with a framework for this population: the **Nine Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners**.

These principles measure the perceptions of institutional team members and the adult students that they work with. In addition to guiding the framework for the Adult Learner Inventory (ALI), the principles also apply in the corresponding assessment, the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS), which is completed by a cross-institutional team of administrators and faculty. The combination of tools is part of the Adult Learner Focused Institution (ALFI) Toolkit that recognizes these principles and provides a snapshot of each institution and their adult learners at a particular point in time.

CAEL analyzes the data from the participating institutions through the lens of these principles, comparing the results from both the ISAS and the ALI to one another as well as to similar institutions that have implemented the tools. The results reveal an institution's overall performance as well as outline the individual benchmarks/questions that define each principle's effectiveness. This thematic data analysis identifies trends that are present at the individual institutional level as well as those that may be present across multiple participating institutions. The combined data are then used to identify and market strengths, prioritize the challenges, and develop strategies to further the institutional goals of recruiting, retaining, and graduating adult learners.

Challenges: Combined institutional and student perspective

In review of 30 of the most recent institutions (both community colleges and four-year institutions) that have administered both the ALI and the ISAS instruments, several areas of agreement have emerged, starting with three principles most often reported as challenging:

Financing
Four of the 13 indicators within the Financing Principle consistently present challenges for institutions. They include: tuition reimbursement/payment by employers; the ease of locating sources of financial support targeted towards adult learners; whether there is a designated staff person to assist students with the documentation necessary for third-party/employer reimbursement; and whether there are clearly highlighted special eligibility provisions designated for adult students.

Teaching-Learning Process
The areas that many of these same institutions struggled with were: not offering self-paced instructional formats; not employing learning experiences that made use of students' own life and work experiences; not making use of problem-based learning; and not regularly providing proactive intervention by mentors and advisors.

After reviewing the 19 indicators that define this principle, two positive aspects were reported by many of these same institutions. The surveys indicated that they establish and communicate learning outcomes to adult students as well as provide prompt feedback on their performance.

Strategic Partnerships

This principle considers the partnerships with employers and community-based and employee organizations that institutions engage with in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult students. Institutions report that they sometimes partner with employers to recruit students and to determine what programs to offer, but only occasionally work with community- and employee-based organizations. The institutions that were ranked very low on this principle rarely worked with outside organizations to determine the effectiveness of programs and services or actively involved external partners in assessing the effectiveness of the learning within the community. Note that this is the only principle that is not also captured on the Adult Learner Inventory, since it has been determined that students are unlikely to be aware of the strategic partnerships that exist at the institution.

Strengths: Combined institutional and student perspective

Technology

For many institutions, technology ranked as one of their top-ranked principles. Colleges and universities share a number of benchmarks to achieve a high ranking for this principle. These institutions offer learning experiences that make substantial use of technology, online delivery of instruction, and computer-based delivery of student support services, including academic advising, admissions information, business office services, financial aid information, employment services, learning resources, and registration opportunities.

Life and Career Planning

Institutions that scored well for this principle share the following characteristics: most or all of their students participate in an orientation course at the beginning of their enrollment; most or all students have an advisor or single point of contact that will assist them throughout their college experience; and most or all students have a clear plan of study, offering a timeline for what needs to be accomplished and when it needs to be completed.

Recognizing the strengths and challenges that institutions face is just the starting point. The goal of both the ALI and the ISAS is to help leaders and practitioners better understand the areas where they need to direct attention and expertise to assist adult students in successfully completing their educational goals.

Participating institutions

Institutions administering the four-year version of the Adult Learner Inventory

Albright College, PA
Armstrong State University, GA
Ashford University, IA
Austin Peay State University, TN
Baptist College of Health Sciences, TN
Belmont University, TN
Bethel University, MN
Cedar Crest College, PA
Christian Brothers University, TN
Cleary University, MI
Columbus State University, GA
Creighton University, NE
Dalton State College, GA
DeSales University, PA
Doane College, NE
Dominican University of California, CA
Elizabethtown College, PA
Elms College, MA
Fort Valley State University, GA
Gardner-Webb University, NC
Golden Gate University, CA
Grand Valley State University, MI
Houghton College, NY
Johnson C. Smith University, NC
Kaplan University, IL
Lee University, TN
Lincoln College, IL
Lipscomb University, TN
Loyola University Chicago, IL
Metropolitan State University, MN
Middle Tennessee State University, TN
Midstate College, IL
Millikin University, IL
Mount Olive College, NC
Multnomah University, OR
Northern Kentucky University, KY
Ohio Christian University, OH
Providence College, RI
Rivier University, NH
Roberts Wesleyan College, NY
Roosevelt University, IL
St. Ambrose University, IA
St. Edward's University, TX
Tennessee State University, TN
The University of Memphis, TN
Thomas Edison State College, NJ
Tusculum College, TN
University of Maine, ME
University of Maine at Augusta, ME

University of Maine at Farmington, ME
University of Maine at Fort Kent, ME
University of Maine at Machias, ME
University of Maine at Presque Isle, ME
University of Nebraska at Omaha, NE
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, NC
University of Pittsburgh, PA
University of Southern Maine, ME
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, TN
University of the Incarnate Word, TX
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, WI
University of Wisconsin-Superior, WI
Western Kentucky University, KY
Whitworth University, WA
Winona State University, MN
Wisconsin Lutheran College, WI

Institutions administering the community college version of the Adult Learner Inventory

Arkansas Tech University, AR
Atlanta Metropolitan State College, GA
Bainbridge College, GA
Carl Sandburg College, IL
Chattanooga State Community College, TN
Cleveland State Community College, TN
College of DuPage, IL
College of Lake County, IL
Columbia State Community College, TN
Dakota County Technical College, MN
Dyersburg State Community College, TN
Guilford Technical Community College, NC
Heartland Community College, IL
Highland Community College, IL
Inver Hills Community College, MN
Jackson State Community College, TN
Midlands Technical College, SC
Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical, MN
Montana State University - Northern, MT
Motlow State Community College, TN
Nashville State Community College, TN
Normandale Community College, MN
Pellissippi State Technical Community College, TN
Riverland Community College, MN
Roane State Community College, TN
Rochester Community and Technical College, MN
South Central College, MN
Southwest Tennessee Community College, TN
Southwestern Illinois College, IL
Tennessee College of Applied Technology- Shelbyville, TN
Tennessee College of Applied Technology-Dickson, TN
University of Montana Western, MT
Volunteer State Community College, TN
Walters State Community College, TN
Western Technical College, WI

About the survey instrument used in this report

The Adult Learner Inventory provides four-year and two-year institutions with valuable data for student retention, campus planning, and accreditation. To see samples and learn more, visit RuffaloNL.com/ALI.

About Ruffalo Noel Levitz

Ruffalo Noel Levitz provides higher education and nonprofit organizations with technology-enabled services, software, and consulting for enrollment and fundraising management. More than 3,000 colleges and universities and numerous nonprofit clients worldwide have partnered with us for:

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- Student assessments, campus assessments, and institutional research
- Student recruitment, marketing, and financial aid
- Fundraising management

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Questions about this paper?

Please email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com. We can discuss the findings, as well as ways you can assess your current students and engage your alumni.

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