RUFFALO
NOEL LEVITZ

2014-2015 Research Report

NATIONAL ADULT STUDENT PRIORITIES REPORT

An examination of the top priorities and satisfaction levels of adult undergraduate and graduate students

This national report examines responses from more than 88,000 adult students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate courses, recording their satisfaction and priorities in key areas such as:

- Factors that lead to adult students enrolling in their courses
- Institutional strengths and challenges
- Instructional and advising effectiveness
- Registration processes and access to courses
- Campus climate
- Admissions and financial aid

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

Why assessing adult learners is crucial for today's colleges and universities

Since 2000, adult learners (students age 25 and older) have become one of the fastest growing college student populations. Between 2000 and 2011, their enrollment increased by 41 percent, and it is expected to grow another 14 percent through 2021. They comprise nearly 40 percent of the total student population.

This is a population that often approaches higher education very differently than traditional-aged college students. They frequently have careers, families, and other significant responsibilities to juggle along with their education. They also may have different expectations and goals for their college experience than traditional students. Their circumstances may also lead them to suspend or discontinue their education if their expectations and concerns are not being met, which is why assessing their satisfaction and priorities is important.

But how satisfied are they with their educational experience? Do they feel the education they receive is valuable? Do they receive enough support from their institutions?

This report presents a national snapshot of satisfaction and priorities of adult learners across the country. The report covers a diverse range of key topics, illuminating how institutions are currently serving adult students and areas where institutions could improve the quality of the experience. It provides national benchmarks for other campuses that are surveying the satisfaction and priorities of their adult learners.

About the survey instrument and response group

The *2014-2015 National Adult Student Priorities Report* presents student responses to the Adult Student Priorities Survey™ (ASPS) from fall 2011 through spring 2014:

- **88,727 students from 150 institutions**
- 47,889 undergraduate students (54 percent of respondents)
- 34,823 graduate students (39 percent of respondents)
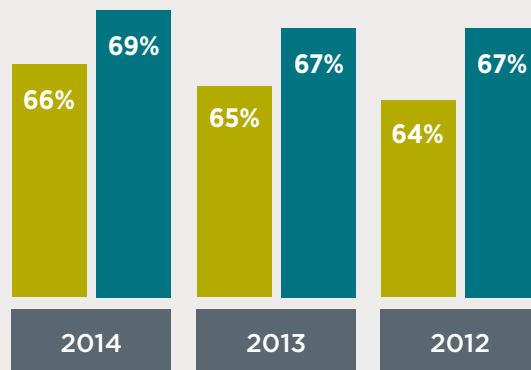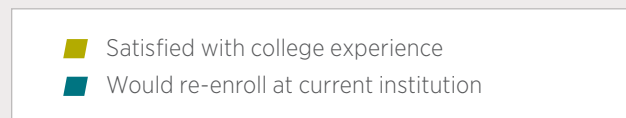- The remaining 7 percent of respondents listed class level as "other"

Adult learners approach higher education differently than traditional college students.

Overall satisfaction of adult students

Before diving into student satisfaction on specific topics, how do adult students feel about their college experience overall? Two items examine that question. First, students rated whether they were satisfied with their overall learning experience. They were also asked, if they had to do it all over again, would they re-enroll at their current institution? The following figure also reflects the trends on these responses over the past three years.

FIGURE 1:

Overall satisfaction and re-enrollment likelihood for all adult learners (undergraduate and graduate)

- Satisfied with college experience
- Would re-enroll at current institution

	2014	2013	2012
Satisfied with college experience	66%	65%	64%
Would re-enroll at current institution	69%	67%	67%

These numbers provide a bottom-line summary of how adult students rate their institutions. Overall, satisfaction and re-enrollment numbers have held steady or increased slightly over the past three years. While not reflected in this figure, the satisfaction and re-enrollment percentages were also nearly identical for undergraduate and graduate students. However, more than 30 percent of the students were not satisfied or reported that they would not re-enroll at their current institution if they had to repeat their educational experience all over again.

Strengths of adult learner programs

Individual items on the inventory were analyzed to determine institutional strengths *(high importance and high satisfaction)*. Strengths are defined as those items above the midpoint in importance and in the top quartile of satisfaction.

The following strengths were identified by adult students, listed in order of importance:

Challenges are items where students indicate high priority but low satisfaction

- The content of courses within my major is valuable.
- Nearly all faculty are knowledgeable in their field.
- There is a commitment to academic excellence at this institution.
- Major requirements are clear and reasonable.
- My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.
- Registration processes are reasonable and convenient for adults.
- Faculty are usually available for adult students outside of the classroom by phone, email, or in person.
- The staff at this institution are caring and helpful.
- I am able to complete most of my enrollment tasks in one location.
- My academic advisor is accessible by telephone and email.
- Classroom locations are safe and secure for all students.

Institutions often incorporate their strengths into their marketing activities, recruiting materials, and internal and external public relations opportunities, as well as use them to provide positive feedback for campus personnel and adult students.

Challenges of adult learner programs

Survey items were also analyzed to determine key challenges *(high importance and low satisfaction)*. Challenges are defined as being above the midpoint in importance and in the bottom quartile of satisfaction or the top quartile of performance gaps.

Adult students identified the following items as their top challenges, listed in order of importance:

- Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.
- I am able to register for classes with few conflicts.
- Faculty provide timely feedback about my progress.
- Adequate financial aid is available for most adult students.
- I seldom get the "run-around" when seeking information at this institution.
- There are sufficient options within my program of study.

These issues are crucial to improving retention (each institution will have its own list of challenges). Nationally, adult students have high expectations in these areas, but feel their institutions are not meeting those expectations. Areas of dissatisfaction were prioritized by their importance score,

Enrollment factors and influences on college choice

Why did adult students choose their institution? Students noted which factors influenced their enrollment.

Table 1: Factors that contributed to enrollment

FACTOR	ALL	UNDERGRADUATE	GRADUATE
Academic reputation	82%	82%	81%
Availability of evening/weekend courses	79%	80%	77%
Future employment opportunities	78%	79%	76%
Campus location (close to home/work)	76%	79%	72%
Financial aid/scholarship opportunities	75%	79%	70%
Cost	74%	76%	71%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	70%	73%	65%
Recommendations from family/friends/employer	60%	63%	56%
Size of institution	56%	60%	50%

Key observations:

■ Academic reputation is the key driver for both undergraduate and graduate students.
■ The size of the institution, financial aid, and personalized attention were much more important factors to undergraduate students than to graduate students.
■ Campus location and recommendations from family/friends/employer were also more important to undergraduate students.

Issues by scale items on the survey

The following tables are listed in order of priority to the overall adult student population. These data reflect the high importance that adult learners place on the interactions they have with their respective institutions. While the majority of students are satisfied on most of the items, the ones with larger performance gaps (and high importance) reflect priorities for improvement.

How to read the results on the following tables

Students in this survey answered numerous items about their college experience, providing two ratings:

■ Importance shows the percentage of students who said the item was important or very important with a rating of a six or seven on the ASPS's seven-point scale for importance.
■ Satisfaction shows the percentage of students who said they were satisfied or very satisfied with a rating of a six or seven on the ASPS's seven-point scale for satisfaction.
■ Gap is the difference between the importance score and the satisfaction score.

Strengths and challenges are also highlighted in the tables.

■ Strengths are items with high importance, high satisfaction, and a small gap. **These are items in green.**
■ Challenges are items with high importance, low satisfaction, and a large gap. **These are items in red.**

Items that were between a strength and challenge are in black. Note that strengths and challenges are relative to the data set. What may be listed as a challenge or strength for one student population may not be a strength or challenge for another, even if the importance, satisfaction, and gap scores are identical.

Table 2: Instructional effectiveness

SURVEY ITEM/STUDENT RATING	ALL	UNDERGRADUATE	GRADUATE
The content of the courses within my major is valuable.			
Importance	95%	94%	96%
Satisfaction	74%	74%	73%
Gap	21%	20%	23%
The quality of instruction I receive in my program is excellent.			
Importance	95%	95%	96%
Satisfaction	71%	72%	70%
Gap	24%	23%	26%
Nearly all faculty are knowledgeable in their field.			
Importance	95%	95%	96%
Satisfaction	80%	80%	81%
Gap	15%	15%	15%
There is a commitment to academic excellence at this institution.			
Importance	94%	94%	95%
Satisfaction	72%	74%	71%
Gap	22%	20%	24%
Major requirements are clear and reasonable.			
Importance	94%	94%	95%
Satisfaction	73%	72%	74%
Gap	21%	22%	21%
Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.			
Importance	92%	91%	93%
Satisfaction	72%	72%	72%
Gap	20%	19%	21%
Faculty provide timely feedback about my progress.			
Importance	92%	91%	92%
Satisfaction	63%	64%	62%
Gap	29%	27%	30%
Faculty are usually available for adult students outside the classroom by phone, by email, or in-person.			
Importance	90%	90%	91%
Satisfaction	77%	76%	78%
Gap	13%	14%	13%
There are sufficient options within my program of study.			
Importance	90%	91%	89%
Satisfaction	60%	62%	58%
Gap	30%	29%	31%

Key observations:

- Most instruction items are considered strengths by both undergraduate and graduate adult students.
- Graduate students indicate that the quality of the instruction is a challenge.
- Adult students in all categories identify timely feedback as an area of concern, which is a challenge item also identified by traditional-age students (Noel-Levitz, 2014).
- Adult students are also concerned with the number of options in their program of study, which is likely an indicator of being able to get courses when they need them.

Table 3: Academic advising   ™

SURVEY ITEM/STUDENT RATING	ALL	UNDERGRADUATE	GRADUATE
My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.			
Importance	**92%**	**92%**	**91%**
Satisfaction	**74%**	**74%**	**74%**
Gap	**18%**	**18%**	**17%**
When students enroll at this institution, they develop a plan to complete their degree.			
Importance	**90%**	**91%**	**88%**
Satisfaction	**70%**	**70%**	**69%**
Gap	**20%**	**21%**	**19%**
My academic advisor is accessible by telephone and email.			
Importance	**89%**	**90%**	**88%**
Satisfaction	**75%**	**76%**	**75%**
Gap	**14%**	**14%**	**13%**
My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.			
Importance	**87%**	**88%**	**86%**
Satisfaction	**65%**	**66%**	**64%**
Gap	**22%**	**22%**	**22%**
My advisor helps me apply my academic major to specific career goals.			
Importance	**86%**	**88%**	**84%**
Satisfaction	**57%**	**59%**	**55%**
Gap	**29%**	**29%**	**29%**
My academic advisor is available at times that are convenient for me.			
Importance	**84%**	**86%**	**81%**
Satisfaction	**67%**	**68%**	**65%**
Gap	**17%**	**18%**	**16%**

Key observations:

- Adult students are generally satisfied and positive about their academic advising experiences.
- Assisting undergraduate students with applying their academic majors to their career goals is one area of improvement. They are likely interested in being able to make a direct connection on the work they are doing in the classroom to how it will improve their career opportunities.

Table 4: Campus Climate

SURVEY ITEM/STUDENT RATING	ALL	UNDERGRADUATE	GRADUATE
There is a commitment to academic excellence at this institution.			
Importance	94%	94%	95%
Satisfaction	72%	74%	71%
Gap	22%	20%	24%
Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.			
Importance	93%	93%	95%
Satisfaction	58%	61%	56%
Gap	35%	32%	39%
The staff at this institution are caring and helpful.			
Importance	90%	91%	90%
Satisfaction	72%	73%	72%
Gap	18%	18%	18%
I seldom get the "run-around" when seeking information at this institution.			
Importance	89%	89%	90%
Satisfaction	62%	63%	60%
Gap	27%	26%	30%
Faculty care about me as an individual.			
Importance	87%	87%	88%
Satisfaction	69%	69%	69%
Gap	18%	18%	19%
This institution has a good reputation within the community.			
Importance	87%	87%	87%
Satisfaction	70%	71%	69%
Gap	17%	16%	18%
Classroom locations are safe and secure for all students.			
Importance	86%	87%	85%
Satisfaction	86%	86%	86%
Gap	0%	1%	-1%

Key observations:
- Adult students feel positive about the institutions' commitment to academic excellence, which fits with the academic reputation being the top priority for enrolling.
- Adult students feel safe and welcome on campus.
- Colleges have room for improvement in improving campus run-around issues for adult students. These can include experiences in-person as well as those on the phone with campus staff, communicating by email, and online run-around on the campus website.
- Similar to traditional-aged students and online learners, adult students (both graduate and undergraduate) indicate that the perception of the tuition paid being worthwhile is a challenge.

These results across multiple student populations show just how pervasive this issue is in higher education, and it illustrates why campuses need to take advantage of any opportunity they have to communicate the value of the education to their students.

Table 5: Registration

SURVEY ITEM/STUDENT RATING	ALL	UNDERGRADUATE	GRADUATE
I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.			
Importance	93%	93%	92%
Satisfaction	68%	67%	70%
Gap	25%	26%	22%
Classes are scheduled at times that are convenient for me.			
Importance	91%	92%	91%
Satisfaction	67%	66%	69%
Gap	24%	26%	22%
Registration processes are reasonable and convenient for adults.			
Importance	90%	91%	89%
Satisfaction	75%	75%	75%
Gap	15%	16%	14%
I am able to complete most of my enrollment tasks in one location.			
Importance	89%	90%	87%
Satisfaction	80%	80%	81%
Gap	9%	10%	6%
I am able to register for classes by personal computer, fax, or telephone.			
Importance	86%	86%	87%
Satisfaction	78%	76%	81%
Gap	8%	10%	6%
Billing policies are reasonable for adult students.			
Importance	84%	85%	83%
Satisfaction	59%	60%	58%
Gap	25%	25%	25%
This institution offers a variety of payment plans for adult students.			
Importance	83%	85%	81%
Satisfaction	60%	62%	57%
Gap	23%	23%	24%
Business office hours are convenient for adult students.			
Importance	81%	83%	78%
Satisfaction	64%	67%	60%
Gap	17%	16%	18%

Key observations:

- Undergraduate adults are concerned with access to classes and the convenience of when classes are available to them. This is to be expected by adult undergraduates, who are likely juggling responsibilities of work, family, and college.
- Graduate students don't have any registration items that are considered challenges, likely because their courses are well established.
- Institutions are doing well with allowing adult students to complete their enrollment tasks in one location, which likely improves perceptions of quality service and ease of beginning their educational experience.

Table 6: Admissions and financial aid

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SURVEY ITEM/STUDENT RATING	ALL	UNDERGRADUATE	GRADUATE
Adequate financial aid is available for most adult students.			
Importance	**90%**	**90%**	**89%**
Satisfaction	**59%**	**61%**	**58%**
Gap	**31%**	**29%**	**31%**
I receive complete information on the availability of financial aid.			
Importance	87%	88%	86%
Satisfaction	57%	60%	54%
Gap	30%	28%	32%
Admissions representatives are knowledgeable.			
Importance	85%	87%	82%
Satisfaction	69%	71%	67%
Gap	16%	16%	15%
Financial aid counselors are helpful to adult students.			
Importance	84%	86%	81%
Satisfaction	60%	63%	56%
Gap	24%	23%	25%
Admissions representatives respond to adult students' unique needs.			
Importance	84%	86%	82%
Satisfaction	67%	68%	66%
Gap	17%	18%	16%

Key observations:

- Similar to traditional-aged students, graduate and undergraduate adult learners have concerns about the availability of adequate financial aid. Institutions need to be intentional in providing enough financial aid to their adult populations.
- Undergraduate adults also place a priority on receiving complete information about financial aid, so this may be an area for improvement for institutions.

Five additional conclusions and suggestions for improving satisfaction among adult learners

1) Satisfaction assessment uncovers priorities of adult learners and helps create an environment where improvement matters.

As Table 4 illustrates, adult learners have expressed a crisis in confidence in the "worth" of a college education. A large number of adult students, graduate and undergraduate, do not see their tuition as a worthwhile investment. Assessing their satisfaction and using it to guide improvements can not only strengthen the student experience, but also show the concern the institution has for students.

2) Measurement is necessary for action.

Michael Porter of Harvard Business School famously said, "What gets measured gets done." In addition, Ruffalo Noel Levitz has told campuses that what gets done should also get measured, so that progress can be tracked. That's why many institutions measure student satisfaction on a regular basis in order to identify priorities and track progress toward meeting benchmarks for student satisfaction.

3) Student satisfaction assessment can set the retention agenda and provide crucial data for accreditation and strategic planning.

The commuter nature of adult students tends to leave students less engaged than when students live on campus, leaving them more vulnerable to attrition. Satisfaction assessments provide foundational data to pinpoint areas of concern for student persistence in order to devise targeted retention strategies. Accreditation agencies also expect student satisfaction data as a metric for demonstrating institutional improvement; this may be especially true for adult learning programs.

4) Communication with students can combat perception issues.

Media coverage and common misperceptions can undermine student satisfaction about the college experience—especially regarding the value of a college education for adults. It's crucial for institutions to take charge of communicating with students about institutional strengths and their commitment to improvement. This is often one of the biggest opportunities adult-serving programs have to increase the perception of their value and overall experience.

5) Satisfaction has benefits beyond serving your current adult learners.

Adult learners who are satisfied with their educational experience can become enrollment advocates for your institution. Social media in particular has dramatically increased the word-of-mouth effect for adult learning programs. Adult learners can communicate their satisfaction to family, friends, and others, elevating your institution in the eyes of many prospective adult students.

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Participating Institutions

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- Student retention
- Staff and advisor development
- Student success
- Marketing and recruitment
- Financial aid services
- Research and communications
- Institutional effectiveness

Ruffalo Noel Levitz has developed an array of proven tools and software programs; diagnostic tools and instruments; and customized consultations, workshops, and national conferences. With the Satisfaction-Priorities Surveys (including the Adult Student Priorities Survey), the firm brings together its many years of research and campus-based experience to enable you to get to the heart of your campus agenda.

Questions about this report?

We hope you have found this report to be helpful and informative. If you have questions or would like more information about the findings, please contact Ruffalo Noel Levitz at 1-800-876-1117 or email **ContactUs@noellevitz.com**.

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