

HINDSIGHT, FORESIGHT, INSIGHT:

HOW TODAY'S ADULT LEARNING TRENDS DRIVE TOMORROW'S OPPORTUNITIES

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It was *not* by design that the research and writing of this report occurred concurrently with the 20th anniversary of the release of our first, major, in-depth study of how American adults study for college credit. Rather, it was a fortunate coincidence of timing, a coincidence that demanded to be exploited. The timing of the current investigation offered us a unique vantage point. Suddenly, two decades later, we had the opportunity to step back and take stock of the evolution of adult postsecondary learning in the United States since 1988 (*hindsight*). We had the chance to take our accumulated knowledge and understanding to project the future of adult learning and where the biggest opportunities lie (*foresight*). And we could seize the rare chance to compare past and present to understand what has really changed in the world of adult education and what societal and economic forces have driven that change (*insight*).

And what a journey it has been. In the introduction to our now 20-year-old book, “How Americans in Transition Study for College Credit,” we wrote the following as justification for undertaking a comprehensive study:

Two conditions caused us to undertake this study. One was the extraordinary growth in the number of adults studying for college credit. The other was the extraordinary uncertainty among college administrators about how adults study for college credit.

In those days, the hallowed grounds of America's colleges and universities had unwittingly been infested with a new kind of college student—one who was 25 or older and who was studying for reasons and in ways that bore no resemblance to their 18-year-old counterparts. College administrators seemed to be scratching their heads, trying to make sense of who these students were, where they came from, and how they could

best serve their needs. Moreover, the swelling numbers of adult students on their campuses could not be ignored, as they were predicted to grow at astronomical rates—and would, it was thought, one day represent the majority of college students studying for credit.

The growth rate predictions were accurate. The adult students demanded to be noticed and understood. Programs and services would need to be created and adjusted to meet their needs.

So here we stand, 20 years later, with the cumulative knowledge of two decades of continuous study of the characteristics and learning patterns of adult students—those 25 years of age and older. Our research over time has focused on every permutation of adult learners who participate in higher education, including:

- adults taking individual courses, adults in degree programs, adults studying for licenses or certificates;
- adults taking credit courses and adults taking noncredit courses;
- adults studying at the undergraduate level and adults studying at the graduate level;
- and adults enrolled in two-year colleges and four-year colleges, nonprofit, public, and for-profit institutions, in urban, suburban, and rural locations.

But the story actually goes much further back than 1988. It was almost 30 years ago, in 1980, that we began to build our understanding of the adult student in America. At that time, we asked the question, “why do adults learn when they do?” The results of that investigation were published in a report titled “Americans in Transition: Life Changes as Reasons for Adult Learning,” and those findings—that adults study when a specific trigger event occurs and they use learning to manage through the necessary life transitions—became the basis for much of what transpired in the area of recruiting and retaining adult students on America’s college campuses.

What is remarkable about our research over the course of these 30 years is that while the world has changed in unfathomable ways, (just for perspective, the February cover of Time Magazine in 1978 was devoted to the dawn of the “computer age” and the advent of the “miracle chip,” touting the unknown possibilities of silicon chips to revolutionize work and life as we know it) adult students, *at the core*, have not changed all that much. Consider the following chart:

The Consistent Learning Patterns of Adults over the Past 30 Years

Why adult students learn when they do	In response to transitions in their lives, that are triggered by life events - most often career-related.
Who are adult students?	Adult students are most often female, better educated, white, and middle class.
What do adult students learn?	Adult students primarily seek degrees in career related fields. Business, health professions, and education have been the most popular fields of study for decades.
When do adult students learn?	Weekday evenings (after 5pm) are still the most popular time for study.
How do adult students learn?	Adults are part-time students, taking 1 or 2 classes per semester, and participating in classes closer to their homes than their work

All of these “why's” and “how's” are aspects of adult learning that are as true today as they were 30 years ago. Moreover, those areas where we have seen major changes in the way adult students learn over the past three decades have been consistent and in sync with the major changes in the way we live our lives in general in our technology-enabled and marketing-driven society. Just as Americans want everything to happen faster, with more dramatic results in shorter periods of time, as we cram more and more capacity into smaller and smaller packages, and multi-task our way through life, so adults want shorter course schedules, want to complete their degrees in less time, with more flexibility, and are increasingly looking to the power of online learning to allow them to simultaneously learn, work, and juggle family and life responsibilities.

In other words, there is an inevitability to the changes in the learning patterns of adult students, dictated simply by the forces of modern living. This is best demonstrated in the following two major differences in the way adults learn today as opposed to the way they learned 20 years ago:

Over the decades, adults have sought to compress their learning schedules. Whereas 20 years ago, the majority of adult students took courses lasting for 12 weeks and longer, today 60% of adult students take classes that are over in 10 weeks or less.

55% of adult students today report a preference for taking a future course online (either a hybrid course that is partly online and partly in the classroom or entirely online)

Understanding the profile and learning patterns of the adult student in such depth is only the beginning. It is obviously critical to understand the larger context in which these students function. And here we have seen changes, major changes that few would have predicted and that underscore the continued potential growth of the adult student market:

- We know there have been seismic shifts in the way colleges and universities view these students and the way institutions have adapted to serve them. At one time far outside the mainstream of higher education, they are now viewed as serious and sought after students.
- We know there are more of these adult students than ever (more than 7 million today; more than 8 million predicted in 2015).
- We know that the line between adult learners and traditional-age learners gets more and more blurred as a majority of college students of all ages have become “workers who learn” (studying part-time, off-campus, through distance learning), so as to make the distinction between those 25 and older and those under 25 less relevant.
- We know the demand for postsecondary education programs and services continues to grow, seemingly without limit, and is impervious to economic downturns and other key indicators that could traditionally stunt growth (quite the opposite, adults change careers and require retrenching and retooling in good times and bad).

- We know that the higher education institutions that are most successful in serving adult students are those that are nimble, flexible, and savvy enough to leverage technology and schedules to meet the demands of this very busy, overscheduled population.
- And, we know that American education has become big business on a global scale, with the increasing presence of for-profit providers seeking to return shareholder wealth and the proliferation of American campuses opening abroad.

So what do we do with all this wisdom and knowledge? We reflect back and we look ahead to anticipate tomorrow today. We consider ourselves well poised to meet the future needs of our adult learning population, precisely because what they seek has been so remarkably consistent over the decades. And we zoom in on the critical trends that we know will directly impact adult postsecondary education in America.

These trends are:

1. The dramatically changing demographics of our country, fueled by immigration and an aging population.
2. The continued shift in our economy toward a knowledge-based, service economy, eliminating low-skill jobs and dictating the need for workers with higher levels of education.
3. The explosion of technology, online learning, and the “paradox of the luddite”—the inconsistent use of technology on the part of adult learners.
4. Marketing as primal to attracting students, and the advent of micro-targeting and increasingly sophisticated tactics to raise awareness and convince adult learners to enroll at a particular institution.