



WHITE PAPER

Meeting the Needs of Working Adult Learners

**Students and administrators
on post-pandemic imperatives**

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

GUILD

A collaboration between The Chronicle and Guild Education

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Introduction

Well before the pandemic, serving working adult students was a growing imperative, for higher education and for the nation.

As economic changes continue to require more postsecondary education for career success, colleges and universities stand to play a pivotal role in the future of work by connecting working adults with the skills required to succeed in the workplace.

The need is significant: Some 64 million adults lack a postsecondary degree, and 88 million working adults are in need of upskilling in order to compete in tomorrow's workforce. Many adult learners are non-white women with low incomes, who are the first in their families to go to college.

At the same time, colleges and universities are facing mounting enrollment challenges. A huge decline in the number of traditional-age students — almost 15 percent fewer by 2026, according to the “demographic fertility cliff” projection of the economist Nathan D. Grawe — would mean intense enrollment

pressure, and soon. The potential influx of adult learners comes at a critically important inflection point for higher education.

Serving more working adult students also has tremendous payoff for society, including helping more Americans achieve economic mobility, enabling colleges and universities to fulfill their mission, building a well-educated population, and preparing for the future of work. Connecting working students with skills aligned to the needs of tomorrow's workplace also represents an opportunity for colleges to consider new student outcomes. Can institutions emphasize the development of skills beyond graduation that will enable adults to achieve economic mobility and advance in their career trajectories as well?

The urgency of improving opportunities for working adults has come with immense challenges. That has been true for community colleges and four-year institutions that already have substantial adult enrollment. And it's true for more traditional postsecondary providers looking to the future

and seeking to expand into serving new student populations.

Practical considerations have ranged from scheduling classes (time, place, and medium) around work and family demands to student-parents' need for child care. Demand for career-relevant offerings has also loomed large. And adult students have yearned for admissions and counseling aimed squarely at their needs.

Then came the pandemic. Suddenly existing struggles for adult students were exponentially harder. Ditto the task facing colleges. Many individuals dealt with massive disruption to their jobs — some unemployed, many working from home, all under stress. Kids out of school needed supervision, tech assistance, and internet bandwidth. Although many working adult students were already enrolled in online programs pre-pandemic, challenges with access and delivery persisted and in many cases became exacerbated. A collapsing economy meant immense uncertainty about which jobs people should be preparing to fill, in addition to a substantial increase in food and housing insecurity. Covid-19 left many sick, many others worried about risks to their elderly relatives, and substantial numbers grappling with mental-health problems.

To better understand what has happened to adult students during the pandemic, and how higher education can learn from it, *The Chronicle* and Guild Education, a certified B-Corp that works to unlock opportunity for America's workforce through education and upskilling, partnered to conduct separate but complementary surveys of working adults and college administrators. Surveys were conducted of a general population of working adult learners. As such, the student respondents are a random sample and not from Guild's network.

The Chronicle surveyed 607 administrative leaders at two- and four-year colleges in the United States. Guild surveyed a general population of 457 working adult learners not affiliated with Guild or Guild employer partners. To be eligible to participate, respondents had to be currently enrolled in college or enrolled in May 2020, and to be currently employed or employed in November 2020.

The goal: to gather both student and institutional perspectives on the biggest Covid-19 postsecondary pain points for these learners and to hear which college policies worked, which didn't, and what kinds of educational and personal support was simply missing.

Disconnected Priorities

The survey responses showed a substantial disconnect in certain priorities for working adults and the institutions that serve them, specifically in how the student experience aligns with university actions. To be sure, the administrators surveyed work at a wide range of colleges that serve different learners, some traditional-age, some adult students, and some a mixture. Still, with major demographic changes on the horizon, it's striking that some campuses placed relatively low priority on areas where working adult students were most adrift and in need of support, including well-being, digital supports, and child care. Only 19 percent of administrators, for example, said their campuses had added well-being supports for adult students since the start of the pandemic.

Perception Gap

60%

of students say stress was biggest challenge to pursuing education

46%

of colleges report having well-being supports for working adult students

20%


of institutions report offering digital-skills training to working adults even though not all such students are prepared for an online environment

Nearly six in 10 students, in fact, said stress in their personal lives is the biggest challenge to pursuing education right now. However, fewer than half of the college and university leaders surveyed reported having well-being supports currently in place for working adult students. Even so, 90 percent said their well-being supports were somewhat or very effective.

Institutions may also not grasp how food and housing insecurity, increased anxiety, and social isolation have created trauma among many working adult students. When asked about their biggest worry, working adult learners overwhelmingly spoke of financial vulnerability, career anxieties, and existential uncertainty, citing fears of losing their jobs and difficulties juggling educational training with work and home life. One woman interviewed left school after being furloughed and doesn't expect to return any time soon. "Until I get to a place where I am back at work, on my set schedule again ... I am not worrying about how I am going to pay for bills this month, there is just no way I could even think of it," she said.

Other commonly reported elements missing in the learning experience of working adults were meaningful communication with their instructors, cited by 40 percent of respondents, and a sense of community and belonging, cited by 36 percent of respondents. Meaningful communication and community are important aspects of engagement that have been shown to improve persistence for working adults, all the more crucial during the social isolation of the pandemic.

According to previous research done by Guild, roughly half of all working adult students are parents. In their survey of working adults, nearly seven in 10 respondents said increased child-care



Not all working adult students enter or re-enter college fully prepared to learn in an online environment.

responsibilities made it somewhat to extremely difficult to concentrate on academic work. Yet only 17 percent of administrators in the *Chronicle* survey said their institutions provide child care. Despite these gaps, administrators' assessments of their efforts in this area were extremely positive. Eight-five percent ranked that support as somewhat to very effective in helping working adult students.

For the majority of institutions that do not have childcare, or that serve working adults predominantly online, there are a variety of supports that can help. For example, increasing flexibility of class times and assignment deadlines can enable students to focus on their school work after their children are in bed, or

take an exam a day later than planned in the case of an unplanned doctors visit.

One final area of disconnect concerns supports for digital literacy. Not all working adult students enter or re-enter college fully prepared to learn in an online environment. They may require additional support to become acclimated and confident in using online learning platforms and tools. Yet according to the *Chronicle's* survey, only one in five institutions report offering digital-skills training to working adults. Furthermore, not all institutions make in-person training accessible online, which can make it difficult for working adult students to access the support and resources they need to successfully learn and persist.


The *Chronicle* survey found decidedly mixed self-assessments of how well administrators believe their institutions serve working adults. Six out of 10 said they serve working adults either well (49 percent) or very well (11 percent). But four in 10 of these campus leaders admitted they perform “not well” (30 percent) or “poorly” (10 percent) when it comes to supporting working adult students. Asked specifically about services for working adults they introduced during the pandemic, 29 percent of respondents said they added flexible course offerings, while 42 percent said their institutions added nothing.

“We still cater to the 9-to-5 student,” wrote one respondent. When the default is the traditional student, said another, working adults are “an afterthought.” The result, said

a third campus administrator, is that the university tries to make nontraditional students fit into the existing structure “and not the other way around.”

Streamlined, adult-focused advising is an important missing element, the same respondent noted. “Adult students need one or two people who they can go to for everything. Those one or two people may not have all the answers, but they will know who to connect them with to get their answers.” For now, said another, even straightforward matters like hours of operation “do not consider the needs of the evening adult program we offer.”

Making necessary changes isn’t easy, however, whether that’s overcoming faculty opposition to cutting low-enrollment programs or trying new arrangements for working learners. “We are simply not agile,” said one more administrator. “Our leadership is not innovative or energetic.”



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Key Areas of Alignment

At the same time, there was a marked confluence of priorities in other areas, including the importance of strengthening connections between curriculum offerings and in-demand career skills, flexibility in course offerings, and the applicability of skills to multiple career paths.

Covid had an enormous impact on how working adult students thought about the connection between their studies and the future of work. Forty-seven percent of the general population of working adult learners said the pandemic has made them reconsider their career path. “Being on unemployment for the first part of the pandemic made me realize how far below a living wage I was making at my job and makes me want to reconsider the company/line of work I’m in,” said one respondent. “I can no longer rely on positions that require low to no education,” observed another. “Those roles were the first to go during the beginning stages of the pandemic.” Alongside the desire to enhance their skills and increase economic mobility is an increased interest in seeing how their education will enhance their career. In fact, when asked about the value of education, 49 percent endorsed building knowledge in a specific field and 45 percent endorsed wanting the credential to advance in or change their career.

For their part, many administrators in the *Chronicle* survey are on board. Fifty-five percent said they want to better connect programs to skills needed for tomorrow's workplace. Seven in 10 said their institutions are analyzing course offerings to ensure they're aligned with employer needs. And 80 percent said they would be very or somewhat likely to make curriculum changes based on those needs. They are

almost universally aware of pandemic-driven job loss or insecurity among their working adults, and close to two-thirds have seen increased demand for career services. Taken together, the disconnects and overlaps point to a series of much-needed reforms that colleges and working adult students themselves should seriously consider to meet the educational and economic needs of the post-Covid era.

How Institutions Are Responding to Covid

Likelihood to make curriculum changes based on employer forecasts:

80%
Very or somewhat likely

16%
Not very likely

4%
Not at all likely

Improvements envisioned for job preparation in a post-Covid world:

55%
Connecting programs to future of work-aligned skills

34%
More targeted programs toward a specific career path

34%
Allocating more resources to career support and services

Strategies considered to increase working-adult student enrollment post-pandemic:

71%
Analyzing course offerings to ensure they are aligned with employer needs

55%
Emphasizing the importance of ROI of a college degree

45%
Planning for increased volatility in the prospective-student pool

(Respondents allowed to pick more than one answer)


And the wrenching dislocation caused by the pandemic may, paradoxically, turn into an opportunity for real progress in serving working adult students more effectively.

College leaders who gave themselves high marks in the survey offered numerous concrete examples of tactics they used to cater more effectively to working adult students, both before Covid and during the crisis. A crucial campus offering for working adults — high-quality online classes — was a priority cited by a number of respondents. So was flexible scheduling, defined in a variety of ways: class times that students can fit into their work and family schedules; asynchronous formats that don't require

students to sign on at specific times; and elastic degree structures and session start dates to maximize convenience for whenever students may be ready to start their programs. Many cited the effectiveness of adult-focused advising, whether for academics, financial aid, or careers.

Take Wright State University, in Dayton, where many students are service members commuting from a nearby Air Force base. The campus provides much-sought child care at low cost and with priority given to students, staff, and faculty. Many students use tuition remission to earn certificates and graduate degrees. The university offers transfer-specific orientation and advisers, and pays close attention to articulation agreements and degree-completion efforts for adult students. “It is essentially in our DNA,” wrote Wright State’s survey respondent.

After the pandemic began, another institution long known for serving adult students, the City University of New York’s School of Professional Studies, doubled its psychological counseling staff and added other kinds of practical support like tuition scholarships and emergency funds for groceries. It also offered online workshops and webinars that, with no space limitations or need to commute, were well attended by students across the CUNY system.




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Pressures on Adult Students

To say that many working adult students face high pressure is an understatement. For many, simply juggling their typical responsibilities during Covid has been an enormous challenge.

Guild followed-up with six respondents from the working-adult-learner survey to learn more about their experiences during Covid. One student, a woman in her 40s with a teenage son and a toddler, is a store manager at a major retailer who splits her time between work and parenting and squeezes in school at night or early in the morning. She is halfway through her bachelor's in business management and leadership, having previously left college without finishing her degree. She was promoted during the pandemic and found herself responsible for managing cashiers during an intensely busy period at the store.



“I’m Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. in the store. It was definitely interesting trying to rebound and find a routine, you know, around home and around school, around my family and free time.”

“I’m Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. in the store,” she said. “I’m closing, minimum, three nights. So it was definitely interesting trying to rebound and find a routine, you know, around home and around school, around my family and free time. Yeah, it took me probably a year to get used to the schedule.”

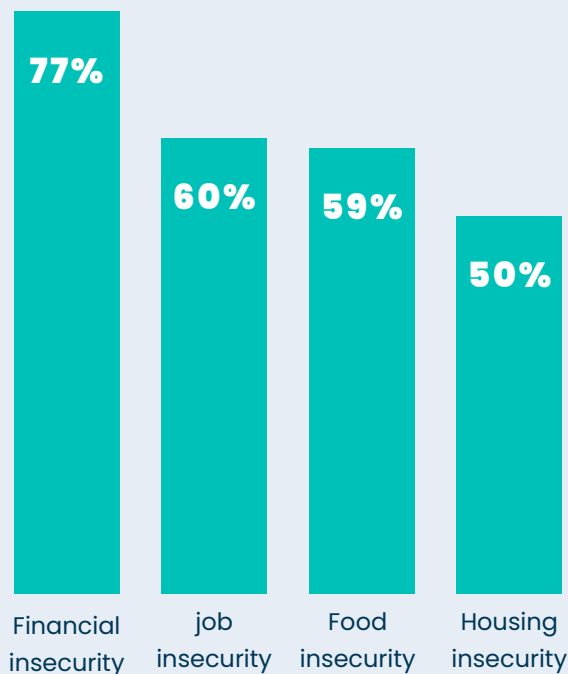
Another student interviewed, a woman in her late 20s, returned to school using her employer’s education benefits. She lived with two roommates to afford rent near her job in hospitality. Due to health problems at the beginning of the pandemic, she dropped out of school and later was furloughed at work, forcing her and her husband to move back in with her parents. She now works for a hospitality-booking company as a customer-service agent, but she dreams of being hired again at the first company and finishing her bachelor’s in hospitality and tourism. “For the meantime I am just trying to work my way up in hospitality, working at call centers and working in semi-manager roles and just kind of going from there until I can get back to school,” she said.

The adult learners survey underscores the intense stress working adult learners felt in their personal and professional lives during Covid. In addition to child-care worries, top pain points included financial insecurity, job insecurity, and mental health. Half said it was “somewhat true” they had experienced increased financial hardship in the past year, and another 27 percent said this was

“very true.” Nearly 60 percent had trouble putting food on the table some or most of the time. More than half experienced periods of housing insecurity. Adding to this worrisome picture, 16 percent said they have no job security; another 44 percent called their current employment “somewhat”

secure. These difficulties surely contributed to the high proportion of students citing personal stress as the biggest challenge to pursuing education. High levels of stress and insecurity lead to higher stopout rates, so institutions risk losing students if they don’t attend to these needs.

Personal and Professional Pain Points of Working Adult Learners During Covid



High levels of stress and insecurity lead to higher stopout rates. Institutions risk losing students if they don’t attend to these needs.

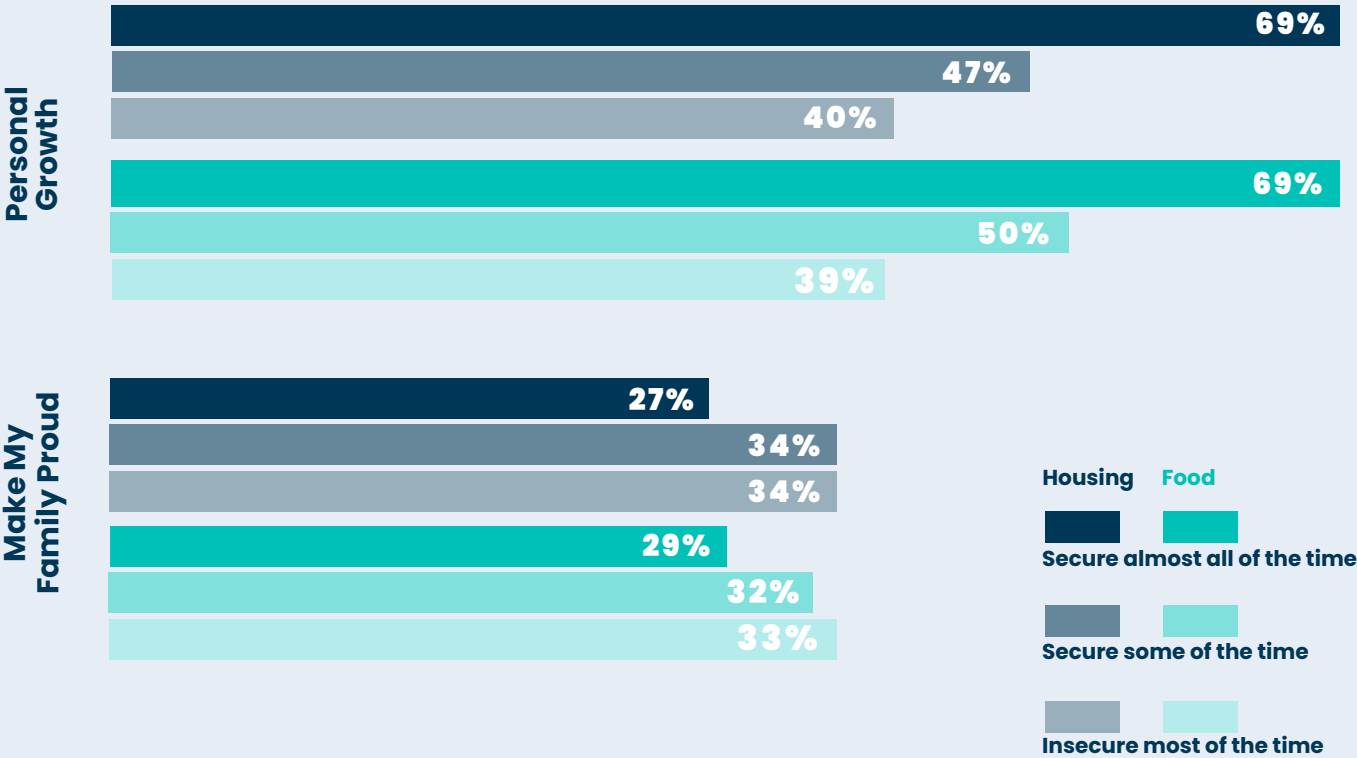
How Personal Challenges Influence Perceptions of Value

One striking gap in the survey of campus leaders, highlighted by the views of learners in the working adult survey, is administrators' apparent failure to perceive the connection between the personal challenges students faced during Covid and how the pandemic influenced their perception of the value of higher education.

The *Chronicle* survey found that 80 percent of administrators saw mental health as a significant concern for students, along with 66 percent who saw job insecurity as a major worry, and 47 percent and 43 percent, respectively, who viewed food and housing insecurity as having “very much” or “quite a bit” of impact on students. By contrast, 38 percent of administrators said the pandemic had produced significant “skepticism about the value of a college degree” among students, with many more seeing relatively little concern about college value (47 percent said “somewhat” and 17 percent “not at all”).

In fact, the student survey showed a direct connection between the two. Personal growth was the most popular choice for the value of education, yet those with greater insecurity cited fewer values for higher education and were less likely to choose personal growth. Sixty-nine percent of adult students who are more secure about their housing and food, for instance, endorsed personal growth as a value of higher education. Conversely, those experiencing problems with housing or food insecurity were less likely to endorse the value of higher education (47 percent of those who

How Insecurity Among Adult Learners in the Past Year Relates to the Value of Higher Education




have experienced insecurity some of the time and 40 percent of those who have experienced insecurity most or all of the time). These more insecure students were slightly more likely to endorse the value of making their family proud. That may be because intangible values such as personal growth are hard to appreciate when you are struggling acutely, and a sense of succeeding for dependent family members may be more pressing.

A related factor is ambivalence about the value of traditional-degree pathways in a post-Covid world. Thirty-eight percent became more convinced of the value of those credentials during Covid, while 42 percent became more skeptical. Only 14 percent of respondents reported being more skeptical of the value of short-form credentials due to Covid. At the same time, around 60 percent of working adult learners reported preferring a flexible degree or credential that can apply to multiple possible career paths over a targeted credential that only applies to a specific career path.

Together, these values paint a picture of how working adult learners view the role of education in an uncertain future of work. Working adult learners want pathways that lead to jobs in demand, and careers with more flexibility and security built in. They recognize the value of education in securing those careers and value whole-person education but are not convinced of the return on investment for longer-form credentials, especially when they are experiencing insecurities in their personal lives. That

doesn't signal the end of traditional-degree pathways but may necessitate that they provide short-term value such as stackability and credentials-as-you-go in addition to long-term value.



“The normal career path is going to look like learn, work, learn, learn through work.”

One married man in his 40s with grown children who works in the corporate office of a manufacturing company sees increasing value in lifelong learning. “There’s no way you could work for 30 years and still do the same job 30 years later,” he said in the interview with Guild. “I think for previous generations that was possible, or at least [the jobs] look really similar, but I think things are just accelerating more and more.” That will require more employer-led efforts to educate their workforce, he believes. “The normal career path is going to look like learn, work, learn, learn through work.” He took some college classes when he was younger but never finished. Now he’s planning to resume the bachelor’s of health-science degree program he had to put on hold when work demands escalated during Covid.

These emerging perceptions of value, whether based on students' personal challenges or their career-preparation aspirations, provide useful intelligence for colleges. "This is where institutions need to be very clear about desired outcomes for the students and their situations," says Michael B. Horn, co-founder of the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation and a senior strategist at Guild. "They need to have more context around the individuals, to know which supports will and won't be valued."

In addition, colleges can do more to tackle the anxieties that can lead adults to be skeptical about degree value or to hesitate to enroll in the first place, Horn says.

Policies like income-share agreements, job guarantees, or integration of industry credentials — with employers included in designing academic programs — can help students see that others who share their circumstances and concerns are receiving demonstrable career value from college.

Takeaways

- ✓ Prepare students for the future of work through translatable skills that can lead to multiple career paths.
- ✓ Provide flexible scheduling to improve higher education's appeal for working adults, including returners who need to complete degrees.
- ✓ Consider admissions changes, including more use of prior-learning assessment.
- ✓ Offer tailored counseling that takes into account the complex life circumstances faced by working adults.
- ✓ Extend support services beyond the counseling center.

What will it take for a range of institutions, from those that are primarily adult-serving now to those that are seeking to adapt to emerging demographic shifts, to serve working adult learners more effectively in the future?

The Guild and *Chronicle* surveys, along with the expert interviews, point to changes that if carried out, show great promise of improving opportunity for older working students. Among the key forward-looking takeaways from the two surveys:

Prepare students for the future of work through translatable skills that can lead to multiple career paths. The results of the survey of working adults by Guild show that adult students are more likely to see the value of their degree programs when career alignment is clear. This is one reason for the introduction of microcredentials as well as the “certificate first” approach used by Brigham Young University-Pathway Worldwide and Brigham Young University-Idaho, Horn notes. “That inversion on that first [credential] has a lot of potential for certain student populations.”

And several administrators who responded to the *Chronicle* survey argue that this academic-career alignment also requires drawing an explicit link between different parts of the curriculum. “A clear connection must be made both between the skills one obtains through the liberal-arts curriculum and through the preprofessional preparation,” observed one leader. Another, a technical-college administrator, said it’s

essential for the institution to work with employers to ensure that the curriculum meets their needs. “Higher education provides workers who have both soft skills and in-depth knowledge in a particular field to be able to effectively enter the workforce.”

Provide flexible scheduling to improve higher education’s appeal for working adults, including returners who need to complete degrees. “We’re looking at alternative models to the traditional three- or four-credit course,” wrote one administrator, citing efforts to create multiple entry points that allow working adults to “step in” and begin a program at a convenient time. Those classes can then be scaffolded into a sequence that leads to a credential. In the emerging hybrid university, flexibility needs to take other forms, too. That includes the modality — online, in person, or blended — as well as the time of day classes are offered, or the option of asynchronous lectures and other activities that students can fit around their work and family schedules.

Consider admissions changes, including more use of prior-learning assessment. According to the *Chronicle* survey, 56 percent of respondents said their institutions have transparent credit-transfer policies and 38 percent said they offer prior-learning assessment, or PLA. PLA gives students credit for their abilities and experience when it is deemed college-level and credit-worthy, together with conventional credit transfer.

But advocates say much more could be done with this approach.

Adult-education expert Matt Bergman, associate professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Louisville, says the availability of PLA is vital for attracting students with some college and no degree to re-enroll. “It’s a pathway for people who are sitting on the sidelines who wouldn’t otherwise consider coming back,” he says. Contrary to the “myth” that making greater use of PLA will deprive colleges of tuition revenues, he adds, students admitted with PLA credits take more campus classes and have higher retention rates as a result.

Offer tailored counseling that takes into account the complex life circumstances faced by working adults. Several administrators who responded to the *Chronicle* survey cited specific efforts to be responsive to adult students’ needs through targeted counseling. One college introduced a “concierge coaching” model in which advisers contact students regularly to focus on any hurdles they face “so they didn’t have to be passed around campus to get answers.” Another offers a single academic adviser to field questions — “a real person, not a chatbot,” the respondent said. Steps like this,

the administrator added, offer a concrete message about sidestepping bureaucracy and caring about students. “Being responsive and timely to their inquiries, questions, and complaints sends the message that they matter, and they have a voice.”

Guild’s holistic student services model has been shown to increase student persistence. Seventy-five percent of active Guild students surveyed across employers and academic programs say their student-success coach made them more successful than they otherwise would have been.

Extend support services beyond the counseling center. Adult students reported that well-being was their biggest challenge, yet fewer than half of institutions surveyed reported having well-being support services in place for working adult students. Services offered to adults should help with basic needs such as food and housing insecurity as well as the social isolation and lack of community many students reported during the pandemic. Well-being support in this case requires fostering peer connection and a sense of institutional belonging for all learners, even in online environments. Consider the format of services as well. Are the support services available virtually? Beyond working hours?

Conclusion

Looking ahead, Matt Bergman of the University of Louisville sees reason for optimism as more and more campuses adapt to a world in which working adults are a larger part of university life. After all, higher education has come a long way from the days when deans infamously told incoming freshmen to look to their left and to their right before warning them how few would make it to graduation. The ethos of serving all students has come to eclipse the notion that not everybody is cut out for college.

In practical terms, if more institutions adopt the suggested strategies, they will be able to serve working adult learners in the post-Covid era at the same level as Bergman and his colleagues. Their work with nontraditional students includes flexible schedules that don't require staff to be on campus during conventional business hours but does require them to field questions when students need answers at night or on

weekends. Now, he says, "Covid is bringing these kinds of programs into the mainstream conversation."

Many students who didn't previously have exposure to hybrid approaches are never going back to fully in-person classes. And that means faculty will need to adjust — and will need help. Bergman says he and others focused on serving adults were previously consulted on occasion, but will now be called on more than ever. "We've been a resource to the more traditional side of education," he says. "And now we have clout to be at the table and come from the margins to the mainstream."

With these kinds of changes higher ed institutions will be much better positioned to help adult learners adapt and thrive in the changing work landscape. This could turn out to be an unexpected but useful byproduct of the pandemic and the suffering so many endured.

Methodology

Guild surveyed 457 working adult learners unaffiliated with the company in May 2021. In an effort to include changes in employment and college plans, respondents had to be currently enrolled in college or enrolled in May 2020, and to be currently employed or employed in November 2020, to be eligible to participate. Sixty percent of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 35, with 45 percent identifying as white, and 55 percent as non-white. This distribution is typical of the working adult-learner population in Guild programs; however, among non-white respondents Asians were slightly overrepresented and Blacks slightly underrepresented. The sample was evenly distributed between men and women.

The *Chronicle* survey of 607 administrative leaders at two- and four-year colleges in the United States was conducted between May 27, 2021 and June 9, 2021. Forty-two percent work at four-year private colleges, 39 percent at four-year publics, and 16 percent at two-year community colleges. Twenty percent were vice presidents; 23 percent were deans, vice deans, or assistant deans; 33 percent were directors; 4 percent were provosts; and 7 percent were presidents or chancellors. Institution size ranged from 20,000 or more students (16 percent) and 10,000 to 20,000 students (14 percent), to fewer than 2,500 students (30 percent).

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