

Washington Student Achievement Council

STUDY OF ADULT LEARNERS



JUNE 2022

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We are thankful for the many anonymous adult learners who shared their stories, goals, setbacks, advice, and time with us.

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Executive Summary

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) engaged with BERK Consulting to conduct twelve focus groups with adult learners across the state in 2022. Funded by the Lumina Foundation, the study focuses on populations furthest from educational opportunities, including those from racial and ethnic groups with the lowest attainment levels; low-income, unemployed, and underemployed residents; those who are parenting; and those who would be attempting postsecondary education or training for the first time (as opposed to those with some college experience, but no degree). This study informs efforts to meet a statewide goal set in 2013 to reach 70% of the state's 25-44 year olds (i.e., our early and mid-career residents) having a postsecondary credential. Achievement of the attainment goal will require significant investment in adult learner enrollment and completion.

BERK and WSAC engaged an Advisory Group with experience working with the focus populations and community connections to support study design and recruitment, and to advise on findings and implications. BERK conducted recruitment in March and April 2022 using two primary strategies. First, community organizations that serve focus populations were invited to partner in scheduling focus groups with their participants. The second recruitment method was an open screening tool available online as a Google Form. This form asked for basic demographic information to identify potential individual participants. Groups were then organized by schedule preferences and common demographic characteristics.

The focus groups explored participants' pathways to becoming adult learners, current education and career goals, sources of motivation, information- and opportunity-seeking behavior, barriers to accessing education, and promotive factors to accessing education. The groups also collected feedback on the WSAC College and Career Compass tool.

Key themes from the findings:

- Education decisions are tightly bound with financial decisions for adult learners. The cost of education is explicitly weighed against the potential return on investment.

- Most focus group participants described themselves as capable, strong learners, and auto-didacts, despite not having postsecondary education. There was near universal agreement that education was valuable, though many described coming to realize the value of education later in life.
- Career goals varied, but many were driven by the potential to have a positive community impact in addition to higher earning potential and the ability to materially support themselves and their families. Common career goals included those in the medical field, early childhood education, city planning, and technology.
- Adult learners face a mix of barriers, including financial, social and cultural, and structural barriers in accessing and navigating the postsecondary education system. A common barrier is the lack of direction and focus on what they want to achieve with postsecondary education.
- Participants receive information from a variety of sources, including social media, places of worship, their children's schools, email, telephone, and text messages. Some of the most influential sources are trusted messengers, for example many rely on the community organizations through which they were recruited for information about opportunities, and word-of-mouth from coworkers, family, and community contacts.
- The College and Career Compass tool was well received for having a great breadth of information and relative ease of use. However it is limited in the portion of the adult learner population it can serve well (tech savvy, English-speaking, more focused in their goals). Only one participant reporting having used or seen the website prior to the focus group.
- Adult learners in the exploratory phase need low- to no- cost on-ramps to try school out again. They also need guidance and advisory conversations and easy to navigate exploratory tools that connect to job prospects in their area.
- Adult learners who have a sense of what they want to do need support navigating the education system and developing a plan that works financially and with their other commitments.

Full Report and Findings

Study Motivation

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) is nine-member council supported by a cabinet-level state agency. The role of this Council is to provide strategic planning, oversight, advocacy, and program administration to support increased student success and higher levels of educational attainment in Washington.

In 2013, WSAC proposed a statewide goal for educational attainment that called for 70% of the state's 25-44 year olds (i.e., our early and mid-career residents) to have a postsecondary credential. The goal was adopted by the State Legislature and signed into law by Governor Jay Inslee. By the end of 2019, the postsecondary attainment rate for 25-44 year olds was 61.7%, with significant disparities in attainment according to race and ethnicity. For example, the same rate is 22.0%, 25.8%, and 28.4% for Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Hispanic and Latino residents, respectively. Only Asian residents as a racial category have surpassed the 70% attainment goal (Washington Student Achievement Council, 2021).

Achievement of the 70% attainment goal will require significant investment in adult learner enrollment and completion. Since setting this goal, WSAC has invested in the College and Career Compass tool and several pilots aimed at engaging with the population 25 and older who have not completed a postsecondary credential. In 2022, WSAC had the opportunity to re-focus efforts with additional data collection through a Lumina Foundation grant. WSAC engaged BERK Consulting to conduct focus groups with adult learners across the state, with a focus on populations furthest from educational opportunities, including those from racial and ethnic groups with the lowest attainment levels; low-income, unemployed, and underemployed residents; those who are parenting; and those who would be attempting postsecondary education or training for the first time (as opposed to those with some college experience, but

no degree). The study also had an objective to focus on three regions of the state to inform a potential place-based approach in WSAC's future work. These focus regions were Pierce County, Spokane County, and Central Washington (Chelan and Douglas counties).

Study Methods

BERK and WSAC engaged an Advisory Group with experience working with the focus populations and community connections to support study design and recruitment, and to advise on findings and implications.

BERK conducted recruitment in March and April 2022. There were two primary strategies for recruitment. First, community organizations that serve focus populations were invited to partner in scheduling focus groups with their participants. Individual participants were provided \$75 gift cards to compensate their contributions of time and data, and organizations who supported the focus groups received a summary of anonymized data. Several organizations participated this way, citing alignment with their own organizational goals. One organization conducted a focus group independently of BERK due to the unique multi-lingual needs of their group (Mam, Q'anjob'al, and Spanish). They provided summary data following the focus group.

The second recruitment method was an open screening tool available online as a Google Form. This form asked for basic demographic information in order to identify potential individual participants. The screening tool link was distributed via community partner organizations over email as well as through paid Facebook advertising. BERK also used the Telerivet SMS service to make the form accessible to potential participants without access to an internet-connected browser. These tools were made available in and distributed in Spanish and English. The Google Form and SMS tools together yielded 376 responses. Groups were then organized by schedule preferences and common demographic characteristics.

Most participants engaged in a 60- to 90-minute virtual focus group conducted over Zoom with two BERK staff – a facilitator and a notetaker. The focus group protocol included a discussion of personal stories with career and education decisions, current goals and motivations related to career and education, and discussion of the primary barriers to continuing education. During the second part of the group, participants independently accessed the College and Career Compass tool for three to five minutes, then convened to discuss feedback on the usability of the tool and the relevance of the content. Following the group, BERK provided each participant with a \$75 gift card and a short flyer with information about accessing postsecondary opportunities.

Where there were focus populations with not enough potential participants to form a group, BERK staff conducted 20- to 30-minute individual interviews using the same discussion protocol.

All focus groups and interviews were recorded and mechanically transcribed. BERK staff also generated summary notes from each session. BERK qualitatively analyzed the data using the protocol and key study questions as a deductive framework. The results are presented below, following a summary of participant demographics.


Exhibit 1 Social Media and Flyer Examples

EARN \$75
Join a phone or online discussion group. Share your thoughts on learning and work training after age 25.

GANE \$75*
Comparta sus ideas acerca del aprendizaje después de los 25 años

- ¿Tiene 25 años o más?
- ¿Vive en el estado de Washington?
- ¿Le interesa recibir más capacitación y educación, pero nunca ha tenido la oportunidad de ir a la universidad o realizar la capacitación que desea?

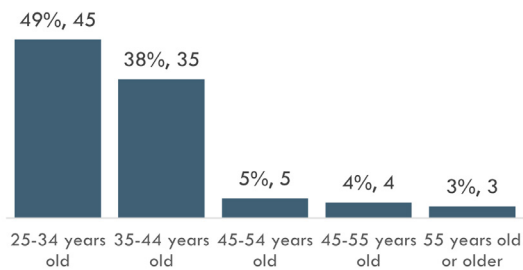
Queremos conocer su opinión!
Inscríbete para un grupo de discusión aquí:


tinyurl.com/
LosEstudiantesAdultos
O Mensajera "Si" a
509-260-9441

*Recibirá una tarjeta de regalo de \$75 después de unirse a un grupo de discusión, no todas las personas que expresen interés pueden ser seleccionadas para un grupo debido al espacio limitado.

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Source: BERK, 2022.

Exhibit 2 Participant Ages

Source: BERK, 2022.

Participant Demographics

Ninety-four people participated in a focus group or interview.

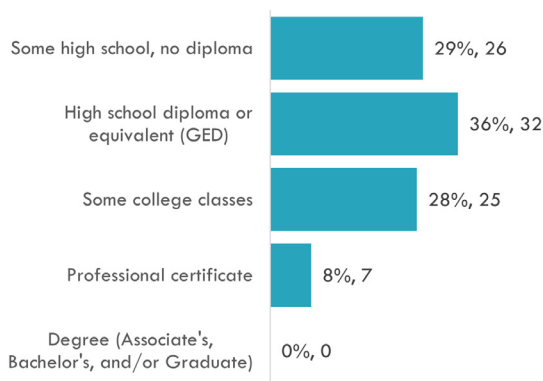
Eighty-seven percent of participants were in the age range of 25-44, which is the range for WSAC's postsecondary attainment goal.

Sixty-five percent of participants did not have education beyond a high school diploma or GED, which was a focus for the study. An additional 28% had some college classes but no completion.

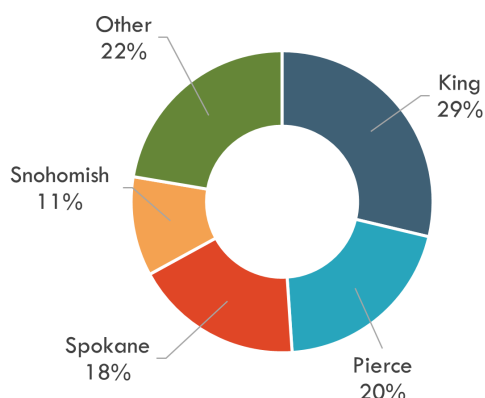
Almost half of participants resided in King or Pierce counties, and another 18% resided in Spokane County and 11% in Snohomish County. We were unable to recruit a significant number of participants in the Central Washington (Chelan-Douglas) area and opted to broaden the lens to include participants in rural areas of Washington. There was a wide geographic range within the remaining participants, spanning 11 additional counties.

Eighty-five percent of participants were parenting. Most were parents to children 12 years old and younger.

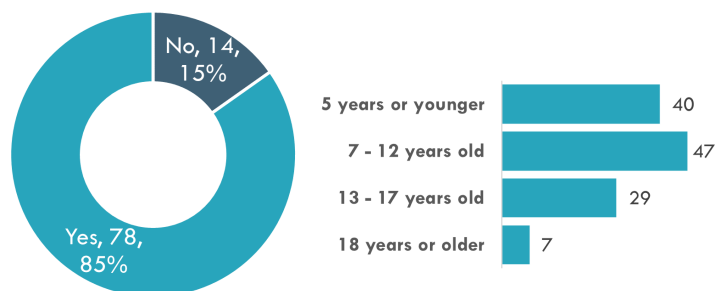
Participants could identify with multiple races and/or ethnicities. The group with the largest representation was

Exhibit 3 Participant Highest Level of Education

Source: BERK, 2022.

Exhibit 4 Participants by County of Residence

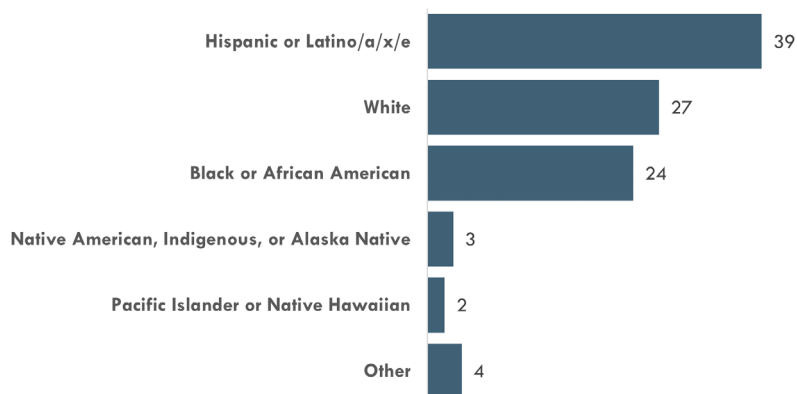
Source: BERK, 2022.

Exhibit 5 Participants by Parenting Status and Children's Ages

Source: BERK, 2022.

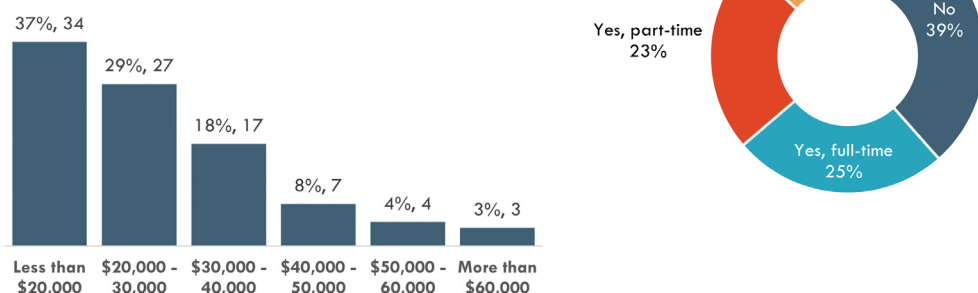
Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Latinx/Latine participants, followed by those with White and Black or African American identities. We were less successful recruiting participants with Native American, Indigenous, or Alaska Native and Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian identities though those are focus populations for closing postsecondary attainment gaps.

Exhibit 6 Participants by Race and Ethnicity



Source: BERK, 2022.

Exhibit 7 Participants by Household Income and Employment Status



Source: BERK, 2022.

Most participant households were low-income or very low-income. Eighty-four percent had incomes of \$40,000 or less annually. Thirty-nine percent of participants were not currently employed and another 34% worked part-time or seasonally. Other employment included food service and gig employment. One-quarter were working full-time.

Though the screening tool did not explicitly ask about former incarceration, two participants identified as formerly incarcerated.

Study Limitations

This is an exploratory qualitative study with self-selected participants and participants who were recruited through connections with community-based organizations, which creates inherent bias in the findings. The sample of participants was not random or statistically valid. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format allowing participants to spend more or less time on various topics of their interest and allowing facilitators to probe further. The following findings highlight some themes according to participant characteristics, but given the limited sample and study design, these should not be taken as representative of any group. In particular, the low participation rates of Native American, Indigenous, or Alaska Native and Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian adult learners indicates that a different recruitment and study design might be needed to collect meaningful data from these populations.

The findings should only be used to generate hypotheses for future directions and programs. For more nuanced understanding of what works for specific adult learner groups, we recommend further research and evaluative work to validate these initial themes with those groups.

Findings

Pathways to Becoming Adult Learners

The focus groups identified several common factors contributing to delays in pursuing or reengaging with postsecondary education. Some factors were underlying characteristics of participants' learning and home environments, while some factors were tied to a critical life event or milestone, such as pregnancy, a mental health crisis, or criminal justice system involvement.

Low support from primary caregivers and adult figures: Many low-income participants (less than \$30,000) had received minimal to no encouragement to pursue postsecondary education from their parents, guardians, or cultural influences. This theme also was common among those who identify as people of color, sometimes intersecting with income. Some participants came from large families or grew up in foster care. Other participants did not feel supported by teachers or felt that other pathways were more heavily encouraged, such as the military or the workforce. The early experience with education impacted their current motivation and desire to pursue education.

“No one cared if I did my homework or looked at my grades or talked about college.”

— An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“In junior high school, I studied for a geography test. I received an ‘A’ and the teacher accused me of cheating. But it was the first time I had actually studied. So, I didn’t care for school and hated it. Now that I’m older, maybe I want to go back and do something. But there’s always the thought that ‘I cheated.’ No one was there to help me study...It’s important to have someone stand behind you to give you that push and tell you to do the schoolwork and stay motivated.” — A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I spent a lot of time with my grandmother who didn’t push education; she pushed a strong work ethic. Even though she [my grandmother] worked at UW, I didn’t get the impression that the space was a space for me...I didn’t have college recruiters talking with me... You set the bar as high as your culture sets it for you.” — An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I didn’t feel as smart as the other kids.” — A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“My family was always very negative and didn’t accept my goals and dreams.” — A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“No one ever talked to me about education. It wasn’t important. I do construction because I am good at it, it works for me, and it’s who accepted me.” — A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“My family has been negative, and I get discouraged when they laugh at me when my English isn’t very good. I still try to improve and ask for help, though.” — A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Desire to pursue education but derailed by external factors: Many of the participants described themselves as interested in pursuing postsecondary education. However, their plans were derailed by various factors including lack of motivation, learning disabilities, mental health challenges, family challenges, anxiety, and more.

“I started school for early childhood education, but when the pandemic hit things got crazy and I had to take a year off school for a mental health break. I needed the personal break but want to go back to school now.” — A Tacoma-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I was reading at a college level by junior high [...]. But with my anxiety and being on the autism spectrum, it’s about prepping to move on without overwhelming myself.” — A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“This is my third restart of community college. I went right after high school, but my sister passed away. During COVID, I tried to take classes at night.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I’m from Mexico and graduated high school but didn’t go to college when I came to the United States. It’s hard for immigrant youth to go to college here.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Family responsibilities: Many participants were responsible for other people including their children and other siblings. This barrier was more commonly mentioned by those who identify as people of color. With these added responsibilities, many dropped out of high school. Some eventually earned their diploma or GED as an adult. Many participants shared that having children and subsequently the responsibilities of parenting as the critical factor in their exit from an education pathway.

“I was a high school drop-out because I became homeless. My parents were not taking care of the children. I did not get my high school diploma until my mid-twenties.” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I have a lot of people I am responsible for. My mother, my brother who is autistic. I am the only person who is making an income. So, it’s difficult to step out and get an education. The priority is working or meeting their needs. By the time I’m done taking care of them, I don’t have time to do anything else.” – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I started school, but when my parents became sick and had financial problems, I had to prioritize working over school so I could pay for their medication.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I am a stay-at-home mom. I did well in high school but became pregnant in my senior year. I graduated with honors but was in a position to grow up really quick and take care of my child. I now have seven kids and am 9 months pregnant.” – A rural-based parenting participant in Eastern Washington who identifies as White/Caucasian

“It’s difficult to attend classes with my family responsibilities. I can’t keep up with the attendance policies - you’re only allowed to miss a certain number of classes, and this is very hard to achieve.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I was trying to balance work, family, and school, but it was hard. I was staying up until 2:00 am and waking up at 4:00 am. It impacted my health, so I had to stop.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

First generation students: Several participants shared that few adults in their lives had attended postsecondary education. As first-generation students, they did not have role models or expectations to continue education beyond high school. Some felt their families

did not value education. Others did value education but did not have information and systems understanding to be able to pass on. For example, one participant mentioned not understanding the difference between different degrees (BA, BS, Master's) until well into adulthood.

“Neither parent continued after high school and I am the oldest child...No one close to me went to college and if they did, they were trying to get in and get out in the shortest amount of time possible.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I’m the first person in my family to go to college. My kids are getting older, and the oldest is 27. I didn’t prioritize my education, so my kids didn’t see the value in it. I started college this year, and I’m three quarters in. I want to show my kids that there’s value in school, and that it’s never too late.” – A Tacoma-based participant who identifies as Southeast Asian

International degree experience: Several participants were immigrants and had earned college degrees in other countries or had partially completed postsecondary work. However, those degrees and credits did not transfer over to the US, or they encountered too many barriers in trying to navigate the US system. These participants expressed a desire for guidance, support, and a pathway to apply their previously earned learning experience to a US model.

“I completed a degree in Mexico and never imagined that what I studied in my country would not be useful here.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I have a bachelor’s in accounting from Mexico, but to pursue this career in the US, I would have to validate my degree - this is a very difficult process with lots of specific requests and transcriptions into English. I need to gain experience and learn the technical language in English.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Earning and employment opportunities: Many of the participants entered directly into the workforce from high school. They worked in a variety of industries including working in a warehouse, retail, construction, service and hospitality, administration, and more. Earning money outweighed the desire to further education and increased the opportunity cost of going to school. This opportunity cost often intersected with a lack of focus and direction for continuing education, which made it easier to opt for employment at the time. Participants also shared that many coworkers had postsecondary education and were at the same position and income as them, deterring them from wanting to pursue education.

“I always wanted to be in a medical field, but I worked at Nordstrom for a long time. It was a job that turned into a career so I’m only getting back to my original goals now.”

— A Wenatchee-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I worked in restaurants for a long time and know tons of people with expensive degrees getting the same pay as me. So, it deterred me from making that investment and justified my decision to stay in the service industry. My kids totally changed my perspective and my life.” — A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I have been in construction for 15-20 years and working in a warehouse for 10 years. But I’ve been going to school off and on for 10 years. I probably have enough credits for an Associate’s.” — An urban-based unemployed parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Law enforcement and incarceration: A few of the participants had been arrested and/or incarcerated, which derailed their education plans or kept certain pathways, such as the medical industry, out of reach due to felony convictions.

“I didn’t earn my high school diploma because I was arrested and on the street. I tried to do my GED, but I was too young and didn’t care. I did not listen until I went to prison a third time. Finally, a woman helped me get my GED at 31 years old.” — An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I originally got a certificate to become a medical receptionist, and I worked there for a few years. Then I got involved in drugs and alcohol, and I was unemployed for a while. I have been drug-free for several years now, but I can’t go back to the medical field because of a felony.” — A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Current Educational and Career Goals

Most participants had a clear education or career goal in mind. A smaller proportion shared that they had a vague sense of wanting to go back to school but were not clear on a specific goal. Most participants described major changes from the education and career goals they had had in their past, some gaining in focus as they got older.

Significant changes in interests, goals, and career paths: As participants gain work experience, many commented on a significant change in their future goals from when they were younger. Others described setting goals as high school students and then working in a different field. School is an opportunity to recalibrate towards their original goals or find a job in a new field of interest. Participants are motivated to pursue education as a way to build their skills and boost their resume.

Some participants who identify as people of color described being overqualified for non-degree positions and are seeking a degree to get promoted.

“I need a degree to get promoted within my department.” – A rural-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Now that I’m older and in my 30s, I’m starting to be overqualified for jobs because I have too much experience...I’d like to earn an AA in retail business management. My main goal is to get back out there. It’s hard to find the right mix of experience. My goal is to overcome this experience challenge. It’s been a long time coming” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“We all work for money. I wanted something that paid well for a stable career. Consistency is really important in my schedule, time off and pay. Retail is commission-based, and the hours were retail hours with blackouts for holidays. I wanted to change that for myself.” – A Spokane-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I didn’t have a lot of goals when I was young. I was working to support my family, so I didn’t have much room to dream. I never really had a career dream because I always put my family first. Now, things are changing. I’m getting immigration documents, I want to buy a house next year, and I’m thinking of starting a hairdressing business.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I was a hairdresser for 38 years. I enjoyed the career path but now I’m looking to get into digital film making at Spokane Falls Community College...I wanted to get out of hairdressing because of the physical demands of the job, like standing on my feet and the 1:1 interactions. COVID gave me a time to delve into my creative self...I want to support myself, but I also want to have fun in the process. I don’t want to work in corporate and I want to work independently... I feel that my skillset is limited but I have lots of life experience... Education opens up possibilities.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“For a while I worked at places like JC Penny and Dominos - the people were great.... Now, I’m thinking about a five-year security program, especially since I can get training through my current job. I would rather be in security than be a police officer, so I can be more of a friendly face in the community.” – A Tacoma-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

Interest in social services and degrees helping people: Participants showed an interest in pursuing degrees that help others. Some in this group were directly drawing on their own life experiences and a desire to apply that experience or advocate for people in their position.

“As a kid, I wanted to become a scientist...I now would like to do something either in the child education field, science, or health. I would love to go all the way to a master’s or

doctorate but I'm going to start small steps." – An unemployed rural-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

"I did some school in [my home country], but now I would like to learn more about becoming a doula, and work in a hospital" – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

"My initial goal as a high school student was family counseling. But I took a detour into administrative work. I've always enjoyed working with children, family, and the community. My short-term goal is to go back to school and get my degree so I can do 1:1 work. Instead of the admin work, I want to have my hands in more things in that way." – A Central Washington-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

"My ultimate dream is to be a lawyer and advocate for people. I wanted to go to Yale. I want to go back to school and provide for kids. But I'm stuck working and know I can do more." – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

"I started as a volunteer in my community, and this inspired me and helped me regain my passion for social work. I want to give back to the community." – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

"I'm thinking about working part time as a chemical dependency professional. I have some hours already logged, but I'm not done. They raised the requirements for the number of hours you have to finish – but I might look into it once my youngest kids start school in September." – A Tacoma-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

"I'm currently continuing school. I'm doing a bachelor's in business management. I want to open a business for medical billing and patient advocacy - mostly for older people and people with chronic illness.... The business, marketing, and medical jargon sides of things can be tough." – A Tacoma-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

Interest in technology degrees: Urban-based participants showed an interest in enrolling in a technology-focused degree. This area of interest was especially common among those who identify as people of color.

"I started college and dropped out. But I'm looking forward to going back to college, and this time, a 4-year college to finish. I'm seeking a full-time engineering program." – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

"I'm looking to switch to tech full-time." – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

"I want to learn something technical (computer-science)." – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I changed from the medical field to IT. During the pandemic, I earned some IT certifications from Google and AWS Architecture. I want to find a job, but I don’t have any job experience.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian and Middle Eastern

“My goals shifted from the radiology program, and I am more interested in IT. It’s a good job employment outlook. There’s stiff competition for lower income jobs, so I’m more interested in becoming a network technician.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I want to take classes for computer science. I’m pretty interested in the topic and ideally, I’d like to make a career out of it.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I want to learn computer skills. These days it’s very necessary, and my daughter has encouraged me to do it.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Applying life experiences to programs: Some participants are drawn to programs that utilize their life experiences. That serves as their motivation and positively utilizes their experience as an adult learner.

“My goals have done a complete 180. I originally went to school without real experience, and nothing showed me what life would be like. I wanted a degree in youth, family counseling...Now I want dual degrees in business and account assistance. I want to work towards being a certified financial planner and open up my own firm to help young people set themselves up for success, or help people see there are options other than what I’ve done over the past 10 years.” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“My current goal is to become a Peer Supporter through Washington State Peer Counselor Program. I want to use my life experience to get certified.” – A Spokane-based non-parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Entrepreneurial spirit and business focus: Many participants showed a strong interest in starting their own business. This area of interest was especially common among those who identify as people of color. They wanted to go back to school to help support that goal. Many of these participants described themselves as self-motivated, quick learners.

“I want to take business classes to be a business partner for someone I know. But I don’t know if I have the time.” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I would like to start a salon business for haircuts and color. My husband is also interested in starting a business, and we could do that together.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I have always wanted to be my own boss. I’d like to start up my own clothing line. That has always been my passion.” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I would like my own garage to do repairs, restoration and work on cars.” – A parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’m thinking about...starting a business. I don’t want to give up. I want to achieve my goals even though I’m older.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I didn’t have a plan to go back to school, but I wanted to start a business. So now I have a plan that I want to go to school...for cosmetology. It’s all about identifying when’s the right time.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I want to start a business. My mom is one of my biggest supporters, but she thinks I need to pursue my business plan as soon as possible without going to school. I think I need more experiences first, so school is on my mind.” – A parenting participant based in Tacoma who identifies as Black or African American

Renewed focus as an older learner: Many participants reported a more focused drive towards learning as an older adult. While they may have explored other interests or pathways, many had renewed motivation, especially among those exploring programs at local community colleges. Many participants found that their work and life experience have helped them define their goals and understand what they want to do in the future. Their experiences shape their direction. Many participants reflected that they lacked this type of direction during their youth, and it took time, maturity, and exposure to reach the point where they value education and understand what they can get out of it.

“When I was younger, there wasn’t a lot of focus on college and school. As I got older, I identified areas to focus on. I want to focus on what I like to do and what I’m good at.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“When I was younger, just getting a job would be it. The more that I experience the workforce, the more I identify what I want to do. My end goal is to find a job where I can work from home.” – A non-parenting participant from Wenatchee who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Being in the workforce and in retail has made me realize how soul crushing it is. Retail stretched into 15 years.... I want to get job certifications in IT and deal with the public less. My job goal is to get out of retail.” – A non-parenting participant from Wenatchee who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Being 40 and going back to school, I have more of a focus now that I wouldn’t have had if I were in my 20s. I have an eagerness to learn.” – A parenting participant from Spokane who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Now that I’m older, I’m more focused and determined to learn. I have a lot more interests now.... I want to succeed! Previously I was partying in my twenties, so I wasn’t available to succeed. Now I want to choose a program I’ll have fun doing while learning.” – A non-parenting participant from Spokane who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Why let age stop you from doing it now?” – A non-parenting participant from Spokane who identifies as White/Caucasian

Motivations

Participants were asked to share their reasons for considering pursuit of postsecondary education. The primary reasons were the desire for financial stability as well as family-related motivations, including many participants citing their children as motivation. A significant portion also described themselves as natural learners, always seeking to grow.

Desire to be more financially stable: For many participants, the desire to become more financially stable is a significant draw to go back to school. This was especially common among those who are parenting and those who identify as people of color. For parents, this desire intersected with the desire to provide a better life for their children and to ensure their children have a materially better life than the one their parents were able to provide. This underscores how education decisions are very much tied to job and career decisions. Though a few participants shared they were interested in topics for the sake of learning, most were making a specific and personal cost-benefit calculation when it came to considering education.

“My current goal is to make more money. I want to become more financially stable. I’d like to move into a house with a yard. So, my goal is to make \$80-100K/year, and I’d like to study in an EMT program.” – A parenting participant who identifies as both Black or African American and Native American/Indigenous

“Money is a significant motivation. I want to earn a fat paycheck...I would go back to school if I knew that I would get a bigger paycheck once I’m done.” – A Tacoma-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I want to continue my AA degree so I can prepare myself more for the future and provide for myself better. Jobs pay more when you have a degree.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Motivation from parents and caregivers: Many participants found motivation to go back to school from their parents and family. Some participants had parents who had graduated from college, so they could see that it was possible and were inspired by that example. However, even those who identified as first-generation students also cited their parents as encouraging education, even if they were unable to support through modeling and knowledge transfer. Another participant cited the work ethic and wisdom of her grandmother.

“My mother went to school for communication. My father does psychology. My sister studied linguistics. I learn from these examples.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“My inspiration is my father. When we were in elementary school, my dad was going to school off and on. He was in the Navy.... And a single dad. He just got his master’s two years ago and he’s 63. He’s my inspiration. He always said, ‘No matter what, there’s always something to learn.’” – A Spokane-based non-parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“My mother-in-law didn’t know how to read and write at the age of 53. She started going to classes from eight to ten at night in an adult literacy program, and now she’s at a college level. My kids say that if grandma can do it, I can do it. Someday I want to pursue education like my mother-in-law.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“My mother [originally from Mexico] taught herself how to read and write.... She didn’t want her daughters to have the same life as her.... Mom said, ‘Just because I didn’t doesn’t mean you can’t do it.’ She would study with us and learn with us.” – A rural-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Children as a primary motivation: Many participants mentioned their children as a primary motivation to seek further education. This was especially common among those who are parenting and identify as a person of color. Motivating factors included wanting to provide for their children and wanting to set a good example for their children. Several were attracted to the idea of learning alongside their children. Though children are motivating, the need for child care is also a major barrier to accessing education for parents. A few parents had the sense that when their children reached a certain age or grade and were more independent, that would be the right time to return to school.

“My daughter motivates me. While I was growing up, I saw some examples of what I didn’t want to do. My motivation is to learn from past negative experiences of what I don’t want to be like.” – A parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’m doing a lot better than where I was two years ago. But it’s hard because of ADHD. If I gave up, I would be failing myself. I would be failing my kids. Who is going to take care of my kids?” – A parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“There’s a relationship between my education motivation and my children. I want to make more money for [my children]. I’d love for them to pursue their dreams. My main aim to get more education is to get more skills and knowledge and a better job.” – A parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“My current goals are to try to get a degree or certificate so that as my kids get older, I can look into joining a career path instead of just being a caregiver as I have been for the last decade.” – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“[My inspiration is] my oldest son. ‘You can do it. You’re going to be a CEO.’ He’s my biggest influence.” – A parenting participant who identifies as Middle Eastern

“I always think of my kids first. My decisions are based on what they need and how I can better their lives.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“My kids are the push to [pursue education] but also the reason I could not do it. But I need to be an example.... It’s challenging to find time and life balance, especially having children and starting classes so late.” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“My children are my inspiration.... When I see my children thriving, I feel like I’m thriving.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I want to be an example for my kids. My parents didn’t have money for my education, and I want things to be different for them.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Seeing my kids’ faces and curiosity is a big inspiration. I want to make the world a better place for them.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“My children are my inspiration to continue my education and work. I would like to provide a better future for them...I want to be able to communicate better with my children’s school and understand how I can better support their learning. It’s hard when my children ask for help, but I am not able to support them.” – A Mam or Q’anjob’al-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and Mam or Q’anjob’al

Guidance from family, friends, coworkers, and supervisors: To help participants access education, they receive encouragement and motivation from the people that surround them. Whether it’s their family, friends, boss, or even teachers in a program, they can all be sources of support in a participant’s decision to go back to school and stay with a program.

“My husband was a dentist in Iraq, but it takes five years to make his degree equivalent [to the US degree], even with 15 years’ experience in clinic in Iraq. He’s starting from

zero, so it pushes me to do the same.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian and Middle Eastern

“I have been working at [my current company] for the last 26 years, and it has helped with my personal development so much, especially from my director. She is very influential to me, and she always encourages me and wants me to succeed.” – A Spanish-speaking urban participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I get a lot of support in the United States from my coworkers. One of them helped me learn how to enroll in school, and she even helped me buy books.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“My close friends push me to keep going” – A non-parenting Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“My boss at current job has been very supportive and encouraging. They’re willing to be super flexible if there’s a test and they will allow me to leave early. They’re helping me achieve what I want.... I know I will have to go part-time and take out loans. But my future career will pay off these loans. I have also made the sacrifice to not live on my own as a way to save money.” – A non-parenting Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Motivated by teachers, supporters, and mentors: Some participants had positive experiences with teachers and support staff while earning their GEDs. The positive experience encouraged them to look beyond high school and aim for postsecondary education.

“I met an instructor who asked if I had considered something after. At that time, I was very pregnant. I wondered what am I doing with just a high school diploma? What can I give my kids besides that one thing? Why allow your past to be your present? That’s a powerful question.” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I wasn’t listening until I went to prison a third time. There, a woman helped me get my GED at 31 years old.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“A leader of a mentorship program guided me to help build my resume.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“The reading teacher, [name redacted], has been very motivating in influencing education decisions.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Motivation from internal influences and desire to change their story: Many participants, particularly first-generation students, shared that they were motivated by the desire for a better life and desire not to “struggle” as their families had done during their childhood.

Many participants also shared being motivated by those who told them they could not achieve a certain goal. They shared a desire to prove people wrong.

“[My inspiration is] my supervisors at work. They’re very universally unsupportive. Every time we have a bad meeting, I want to prove them wrong.” – A Wenatchee-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Mine is a reverse negative influence. I got into a [multi-level marketing] business, and they told me education was stupid and that I could take care of my kids. My kids are my world. None of my friends have completed college. I want to show them that it’s possible to make that decision and complete a program.” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I don’t want to be told that all I can be is a mom. Being a mom is super important, but I am an individual outside of that.” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“People question me because of my age, but I still want to start a business.” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I want more for myself and what I’ve accomplished or done.... I want to do something that makes me happy.... During the pandemic, I reflected and knew I could do more. I want more for myself and more for my family. I want to feel accomplished. So, I kept at it...I took baby steps. I planned out my goals.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I get frustrated with my life and know that I need to improve my education to change things. I want to prepare myself for the future.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Motivation from stagnation: For some participants, they persist in pursuing education because of stagnation. For those who are low-income, education is the primary option out of that cycle. Several also shared dissatisfaction with their employment, in terms of schedule, pay, and growth opportunities as a motivating factor.

“I have thought about [pursuing education] so much, especially lately. The reason why is because my life is too stagnant.” – A Spokane-based non-parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Lots of people are stuck in this cycle of wanting to move on but they don’t make enough money. I don’t have skills that translate into a trade. Education is my only move forward. It’s an interesting spot to be in to make the decision and figure out where to go as an adult.” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Information- and Opportunity-Seeking Behavior

Participants shared a wide variety of information sources for education and career training opportunities. Some of the most influential and inspirational information comes through venues they are naturally accessing, such as their children's schools, community engagement, churches, and workplaces. One participant shared the insight that career opportunities and education opportunities are often advertised separately and from different sources. The information that would be most useful to them would be career opportunities, coupled with information about the education pathway that would make you competitive or eligible for such a position.

Learning alongside children and volunteer programs: Many participants said they receive information about education through their children. Volunteering with the school district is a key source of information. A participant talked about how they wish workforce trainers would come to the high school, and more information had been shared about FAFSA opportunities for children and parents while in high school. Another participant shared that they accessed information through attending their local neighborhood association, which inspired their goal of a city planning credential.

"I volunteer with the school district. There's lots of information to understand the school system." – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as South Asian

"We need to get workforce trainers at high school. Some do not even know about FAFSA opportunities. FAFSA pays for a lot.... A lot of people are getting loans through personal banks. But it's better to go through a college. My parents didn't know anything about FAFSA. College was never pushed. It wasn't seen as an affordable option. We were unaware of the opportunities out there." – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

"Give information through workshops and events provided by my children's school, so I can learn about opportunities that are out there for my family." – A Mam or Q'anjob'al-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and Mam or Q'anjob'al

"My adult kids and I talk about furthering education. When my daughter takes classes I try to learn alongside her if the class is interesting to me." – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Value of word of mouth: Many participants, particularly those who identify as people of color, highly value getting their information through other people in their networks. They described that the internet is not always reliable for information, and they would prefer to speak with people they trust, especially those that have a similar experience or have gone through the program that they are considering. Word of mouth is especially important for

participants who are uncertain whether the return on investment in education is real, or that the job opportunities after education exist.

“I prefer word of mouth from someone who has experienced the program. I go to the internet but it’s not something you can actually rely on. There’s a lot of fake literature on the internet. I prefer to speak with an experienced individual and that’s where I get my information.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“My main source of information is my coworkers.... My coworkers recommend guides.”
– An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I look at how people get to where they got to. How did they get to where they got to?” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I try to take advantage of the opportunities in my community to learn English and get information from people I know.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I get information from groups I’m already in. Talking to people helps us give and receive information, so we both benefit. Sharing with close community is important.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Some go to the internet or social media. I’m not a big social media person, so I rely on word of mouth and ask those who have been in the field to learn from their perspective. They can spread the word and tell the next person.” – An urban-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I do my own research, but I also get information from my mom. She works for ESD and gets info from the SBA and other places that she can share with me.” – A parenting participant based in Tacoma who identifies as Black or African American

“I’ve lived in [public housing] since I was a kid. Your resources depend on your social circle. Hanging out with ‘low frequency’ groups means you won’t hear about opportunities. There needs to be more opportunities to learn about your options and how to advance your education.” – A parenting participant based in Tacoma who identifies as Southeast Asian

Value of organizations and programs: Many participants received information through the parent ambassador program and other community programs with which they already have connections, including WIC and DSHS. They also found strong value in parent and peer navigators, as well as direct conversations with the primary coordinator.

“If you want to reach people, reach them where they’re at. Maybe they need someone to walk through every step. Be a visionary and think of multiple solutions.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Central Asian

“I get my information through WorkForce at the community college.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I got my information from previously attending the college. I am also getting training from one of my jobs. I feel like seminars and job fairs would be beneficial to learn about information and options I don’t already know about.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I get my information through organizations like CIELO and other trusted individuals in the community.” – A Mam or Q’anjol’al-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and Mam or Q’anjol’al

“I heard about the respiratory therapy program because it sent students to the prerequisite classes. I may not have found out about the program otherwise. It’s beneficial to hear from students going through the program.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Value of social media to reach Hispanic or Latinx learners: Many participants, particularly those who are parenting and those who identify as Hispanic or Latinx, turn to social media including Google, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok.

“I do research on YouTube and watch videos as references. For example, I wanted to know more about wine, so I watched around 40 videos to learn. Google and Zoom are also helpful.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are all good places to get information. Emails always get lost in my inbox. Text messages are helpful too, because they go straight to my phone, and people are always on their phones.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I get information through TikTok. I saw an ad for someone who did a program at Clark Community College, and it said to click on the link in the bio. So, I clicked on it and found out I qualified for it.... I’d like to see more of a social media presence with information. Including financial aid programs.” – A rural-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and White/Caucasian

“Social networks depend on the audience. For young people, TikTok is best, but for older adults, Facebook is better even though my kids say Facebook is still in the ice age.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I don’t watch TV, so I don’t see the ads there. My networks online and my husband are my main sources of information.” – A parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Facebook events show opportunities for events for networking and informational sessions. Once you’re in-person, it’s great for finding resources.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Direct, local search: Non-parenting participants more commonly expressed comfort in conducting their own research. Some participants described doing independent online research to identify programs they were interested in and that they could afford. They went directly to the local community college website to browse offerings as well as doing some Google searching. Others found information through the local community college, seminars, and job fairs.

“I knew something at a community college would be in my price range, so I went to their website and checked out the programs. Some coworkers had also alerted me to this program.” – A Spokane-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I like doing my own research, so pretty happy with that.” – A Wenatchee-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I do my own research. I also get information from my mom, [Tacoma Housing Authority], and other places, but a lot of it is email - junk email.” – A Tacoma-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Misinformation: Some participants raised concerns about misinformation and misleading information about programs and earning opportunities. There is also wariness about financial aid information and a disinclination to take out loans.

“A lot of programs advertised for 6-figure jobs are misleading. The radiology program was going to be my end all, but getting into it, I realized I needed more education to make more money.... There was lack of information and transparency about how much you could expect to make. If there were more transparency, I may have made a different decision” – A Spokane-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I was pursuing an AA degree and was told that the classes would be in Spanish, but all the books were in English, so I had a hard time. Everything took longer for me, which made it harder to manage my time.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I get a lot of junk emails. It also seems like educational opportunities are separated from employment. I would like to see this information be more combined, to show things more straightforwardly. I don’t want to invest in an education when I don’t know if I’ll even like the job or be able to pursue it feasibly.” – A non-parenting participant based in Tacoma who identifies as White/Caucasian

Specific recommendations: Some participants gave specific suggestions to any institution seeking to engage potential adult learners, some reflecting on the themes and channels already shared:

- Leverage social media
- Connect through children's schools, community centers, and neighborhood associations
- Connect through local social service organizations
- Communicate clearly about the costs, financial aid, and potential earning opportunities
- Communicate opportunities to talk directly to an advisor or counselor to explore options as soon as possible
- Offer low-cost, low-risk ways to try school out

Barriers to Educational Goals

Time and money were the most common barriers to educational goals. Adult learners have many competing demands on their time, including work and caregiving responsibilities. The barriers often interact with each other, and overall, participants are concerned whether the risk and cost of additional schooling will pay off in the end.

Time: Most participants shared that time is the limiting factor to going back to school. Time barriers include the time that the classes are offered, as well as the time investment that college or a training program requires. Many participants are already limited on time.

"If I could take classes in the evening or weekends, then I could do it." – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

"I want something practical and the best use of my time and money, I don't want to waste time doing a bunch of 'busy work' when I could focus the training and education on my career needs. I know well rounded education requires some extra stuff, but I am hoping the quality of the education matches the cost as well as the time investment." – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

"I would go back to college if there was a way to arrange my schedule to make time for it. I work a full-time job and am providing for my family. It's challenging to do 12 credits on top of that." – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and White/Caucasian

"When I do study, I excel. But I'm exhausted. All I can do is work, study. I run out of energy very quickly. I'd love to go back and get a degree. Then I'd have an opportunity to be promoted. But how to do that when I'm so limited on time and am responsible for everyone else? It feels impossible." – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and White/Caucasian

“I’m working on my ability to juggle what I’m doing. If a program has onsite training, I’ll need to make time for more on top of everything, so that’s another barrier.” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I would do an education or training program if I had the time and flexibility with my responsibilities and schedule.” – A Wenatchee-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and White/Caucasian

“There are people who have a master’s who are still barely making it. I have the desire to go back to school, but I would need to take my time. I have a full-time and a part-time job.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“Do I have time to go to school? How would I make it work?” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Balancing school with other responsibilities: For some participants, time and work/life balance is a limiting factor to going back to school. Often, many participants are balancing multiple jobs and are not sure how they could balance it with school. Due to responsibilities, such as personal finances and childcare, it can be difficult for some participants who may lack a supportive network to pursue their educational goals.

“Right now, my family demands more for me. As a man, I need to provide more for my family. Be there for their costs.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“My major concern is responsibilities, specifically childcare and finances. It would be great to get a nanny or someone to take care of chores.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“My kids are a barrier. We are going through a lot. They have a lot of trauma. I have no family here. We’re going to counseling to be more stable mentally.... I would go back to school if I had the family support.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“It’s difficult when you don’t have someone to support you. I don’t have someone to help take care of my kids while in college. When there is a test, it’s so hard to find emergency childcare coverage.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“My barrier is fear of not being able to work full time and keep up on my grades. I’m also afraid, but I need to take the first step! Yes, childcare is what stopped me from doing it when my kids were younger. I have to provide for my family, so I don’t have the option of only doing school, which is another barrier.” – A rural-based low-income parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and White/Caucasian

“As we are getting older, going to school and having to do 12 credits at a minimum is a lot of stress. It’s already stressful to try to receive benefits. Then when you’re trying to do better and move out of poverty, all of these stipulations are put into place and that brings on more anxiety. With homework, class, a full-time job, and taking care of kids, it’s very overwhelming!” – A low-income urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Major barriers include finances, time, and transportation. Being a single parent with limited help is a huge hinderance. Also, self-doubt is a factor as well.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Childcare is one of the biggest barriers.” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I have considered it. But with kids, finances, and family responsibilities, it just has not happened yet.” – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I struggled because of kids and identifying childcare options. I’ve been struggling during the pandemic too because of the school shutdown.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’m originally from Wisconsin and have two kids. So, I don’t have the same support as others. My main focus has always been to make more money and focus on my goals. But it’s so hard to do it without support and family. I have built up support systems through work.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“They’re not a ‘barrier,’ but my kids do make things harder. I would need a lot more help with my kids in order to go back to school – so balancing childcare is the barrier.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“The responsibility of childcare is very difficult. Growing up, my parents were in the same situation, so I’ve seen parents struggle to balance work, school, and time with family.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“If there was an adult education program that would help me take care of my children, I would want to enter it and study.” – A Mam or Q’anjob’al-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and Mam or Q’anjob’al

Financial difficulties: Many participants mentioned the challenge of paying for school and the additional work needed to access grants and scholarships, especially among those who are low-income, unemployed, and/or underemployed.

“The EMT program is 3 months, so financial aid won’t cover it. I would go back to school if I had a grant or means to pay for the certificate. Instead, I have to go for two years, and then financial aid will cover it. There has to be more ways to pay for college.

There's a state need grant and they should up it a few more thousand dollars especially with food, gas, books, software, living expenses. It goes by fast! \$1500 is not a lot of money. I don't like loans and they're not ideal because of interest. It's hard to take out credit cards because of low credit." – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

"My biggest concern is financial aid. You're not always guaranteed to get approved. I don't want to sit in debt either.... On top of not working, how would I be financially stable to pay off these loans with three children at home just to get a piece of paper?" – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

"I know college is expensive and I don't know where to start or could even save that much money or also the time for school while working." – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

"I would love to start something in the next couple of years. I also don't want to get into any debt because we are living within our low-income means, and I don't want to take on any debt that will make that difficult." – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

"I would go back to college if I had enough resources to finance the education." – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and White/Caucasian

*"I'm spending a sh** ton of money on education. It's an insane amount that is expected from people who are trying to better their situation."* – A Spokane-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

"I need to complete English classes before I can do more [schooling], and it's very expensive. Also, tuition is higher for people without a social security number, which makes finances even more difficult." – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

"I live under my parents as a dependent. So, applying for FAFSA is more challenging because I have to list my parent's income. It's harder to pay for classes, especially if I'm going for a full course load. I still want to go but I'm having a hard time to pay for it without having to pay for loans." – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

"Finances are a big challenge right now. Gas alone was \$80 last week, and I have to drive my kids to their classes. There's not enough money left for things like school for me." – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

"FAFSA and loan information in general has been tough for me because they use the wrong name for me—my old name—and it's hard to change." – A non-parenting participant based in Tacoma who identifies as White/Caucasian and nonbinary

“My parents want me to continue studying, but school is expensive and I can’t pay it and neither can my parents.” – A Mam or Q’anjob’al-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and Mam or Q’anjob’al

Finding the right program: For some participants, they have not found a program that is the right fit for them. A barrier for them was deciding what they wanted to do before going back to college. It can be challenging to narrow down and pick a program to stick with and complete.

“I would go back to school if I had funds, time, and real passion.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian

“I would go back to school if I have passion for the program.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I would go back to school once I narrow down what I want to do. I’m having a hard time deciding. How do I figure out what I want to do and not change what I want to do halfway through?” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I’m still interested in being a medical assistant, but it’s hard to find the right school. I want to go to a reputable institution that will hold weight when I graduate.” – A parenting participant based in Tacoma

“Right now, I don’t have concrete goals, so that’s my barrier. I’m interested in human services, but I don’t know if it will pay the bills. Things would be easier if I had a set goal – but I still don’t know ‘what I want to be when I grow up.’” – A parenting participant based in Tacoma

“I know someone who is starting a business, so I think I might want to take business classes to become her business partner. I might not have time for this, though. It’s hard to know.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Nervous about not completing a program: Many participants expressed anxiety around not completing the program. They want to ensure they can stick with the program and see it to completion, as some participants had previously quit school. One participant was nervous about their skills to handle a full course load.

“I have a brother who trained in engineering for 5 years, and he dropped out after a year.... I have a fear that I’ll follow in the same path as my brother.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’m making sure I have the skills I’m going to need to handle a full course load, so I don’t have to drop out halfway through the quarter.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“The Pell Grant forces you to take at least 12 credits. But if I take that many, I can’t focus on doing that much homework. I’m autistic and can’t handle the stress. I want to spread out the education. If I had a Pell Grant to take just one class every quarter, then I could handle college. But I’ve already used up all my electives. I’m afraid to go back to college because it’ll be too stressful. I have already had to retake classes and get permission to take a class. This happened before I knew I was autistic.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Why do we have to take so many credits per quarter? Some of us have different learning styles. Not all of us can go to back-to-back classes and then do homework.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Internal self-motivation: Some participants cited “procrastination” and self-motivation as a barrier to going back to college. Many described the need to define their focus before going back to school.

“I hold myself back. I’m my own critic.... When I get depressed, it is even harder.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“As time went on, it wasn’t the main goal to go back to school just to do it. It’s about picking and choosing what you want to do in life and can get paid to do. Then, you can go back to school in those specific areas...I will go back to school when everything lines back up. Timing, family responsibilities, finances.” – An urban-based non-parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I didn’t plan on going back to school but I wanted to start a business. So now I have a plan that I want to go to school. So, it’s about identifying when’s the right time.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I would go back to school when I have a better plan to go to school physically and emotionally.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’ve definitely considered [going to school], usually a reaction to something perturbing me at work. A lot of barriers have been self-imposed. My personality type is to put things off. It’s getting to the point where I should probably do something.” – A Wenatchee-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Age limitations: Participants who are in their thirties or older expressed anxiety about their age and returning to a school system after working for so long. For examples, a participant wanted to go back to school but is nervous for the placement tests due to being out of school for so long. Because they are older, they recognize that they might need to readjust to a learning environment, which would require additional time. There is also discomfort with being back in that environment. Some felt that it would be especially intimidating or uncomfortable to be learning alongside students many years younger.

“I would go back to school if the placement test wasn’t so advanced. I’m so nervous about the math test. I can’t remember math. I need to take a pre-course. I get nervous about the test.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“As an older student, the wheels aren’t turning as fast.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American and is between 35 and 44 years old

“It would be challenging because I feel so old, and it would be a lot of work. I feel like it would be double the work.” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and is 35-44 years old

“I’m way past college age and would have to play catch-up. I don’t want to spend time doing that.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American and is between 35 and 44 years old

“I have a fear and worry that I’ve been out of school for so long.... I feel so much older and I’m in a different place in my life.” – A Spokane-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian and is between 25 and 34 years old

“I am interested in the medical field, but it is hard to go back and start over.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian and is between 35 and 44 years old

Difficulties with navigating the academic system: For some participants, they felt unfamiliar navigating the college system. From identifying a program to understanding how to apply for financial aid and grants, it is challenging to know if one is doing it correctly.

Some participants felt unwelcome during their interactions with the community college system including in-person on campus and in remote interactions. They felt that information and guidance was not clear or would be conflicting among different sources. They also experienced a lack of communication and responsiveness. Others mentioned that the campus itself felt unwelcoming. Some participants attributed some of the difficulty navigating to their relative youth and inexperience at the time. They learned and accepted over time that community college is more of self-directed experience and that community colleges are under resourced.

“I had a horrible experience.... It was difficult getting answers about what was expected of me to apply. I had to delay my application to the program for a year due to the lack of communication and difficulty getting any direction. I stumbled through it. My younger sister is always like ‘I don’t know how you do it and who you are talking to.’ I’m like ‘I’m talking to a wall’.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Bureaucracy in the education system can be a barrier. It’s hard to get through.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I went back to community college with a Pell Grant. But I took on too much and my cumulative GPA dropped. I didn’t know it was about withdrawing and not just taking the ‘F,’ so I was put on probation. I have considered reenrolling, but I couldn’t remember my passcode. There are too many hoops to jump through, and I still don’t have the money to pay for the class.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Language: Many participants, especially those who are native Spanish speakers, cited language as a major barrier to continuing their education. Some participants showed desires to learn basic English skills, and others want to focus on improving their capacity for technical language in their fields.

“My English isn’t very good, and I get discouraged when people laugh at me for it. I always try to improve and learn when people try to correct me. I ask what I did wrong and how to fix it so I can get better.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I want to improve my English, but I still want to use my Spanish. I think there’s a way to continue using my Spanish and to help support the Latino community.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“English is very difficult. I practice with my kids and try to use the Internet, but I still don’t understand all the time.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I started high school but didn’t finish. Now, I want to get my GED, but I’m embarrassed about my English abilities. I want to take some English classes.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I signed up for school three times, and the teachers said I was doing well, but when I try to use English in practice, I forget the words.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“It’s difficult to communicate since I don’t speak English very well, just a few words, but not enough for me to understand. That stops me from working up in the company.” – A Mam or Q’anjob’al-speaking parenting participant

Accessibility: A participant described struggling to find information that aligned with their experience as an adult learner. They did not feel that the information was geared towards them.

“Usually when I have to look up something specific, it’s not always easy to see or find something that might be available. I see commercials but they always seem geared towards younger students or those who can get loans. You don’t see how to get grants

or scholarships. Without knowing what to look for, it can be difficult. Sometimes I hear of things that my kids are being told at school but it's for them and not for adult learners.... I feel that if society cares about those levels of education being accessible to more diverse groups, then there should be more opportunities to do so.” – A rural-based parenting participant who identifies as White/Caucasian and is unemployed

“Sometimes I don’t know when classes will be available, and by the time I do find out, it’s usually too late.... I can see some information, but I think I’m missing a lot.” – A parenting Spanish-speaking participant

Transportation: A small number of participants shared that transportation was a barrier for them. Two were immigrants who did not have driver’s licenses.

Promotive Factors to Educational Goals

About a third of participants had some college experience, whether in the past or as current students. They shared what factors helped them access, navigate, and persist in education. Potential adult learners answered about what would compel them to return to school.

Understanding instructors and professors: Due to the participants balancing school with other responsibilities, it is important to have flexible professors. Some participants who had previously attended classes remarked on the positive experience they have had with understanding professors. For adult learners, instructors are the main, and sometimes sole, point of contact with the institution. Understanding instructors also play a role in helping learners refine and articulate their education goals, and sometimes set their ambitions higher.

“When there is a test, it’s so hard to find emergency childcare coverage. So, I had to take kids to college. My professor let me take the test at home. The professor cares but not every professor does.” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“An instructor would lock the assignment modules and I hated that. It was not flexible for balancing jobs and childcare. When I worked on assignments, I wanted to do it in a lump....I prefer if instructors unlock all of the modules, and you could work at your own pace. You could still have Zoom calls, check-ins, and discussions.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“Teachers should be a resource too. Can a teacher be more helpful? Have more drop-in hours? Be more flexible?” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

Importance of peer navigators and mentors: Participants remarked on the usefulness of an advisor to provide guidance based on the person’s experiences and skillsets. Participants of

color were more likely to want to engage in a conversation with a live person. Engaging with someone initially can be valuable as adult learners identify their goals and future path.

“I want real path and guidance who can advise me according to my skillsets and experiences. I want to enhance my skills on-the-job.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as South Asian

“I would go back to school if the organization had a mentor for those who are interested. Yes, the website is available, but a mentor can help with the process.” – A Pierce County-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I would think more about going back to school if I could have a mentor or coach to help me reach my goals and support me.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I would go back to school if I had the support, like childcare and an advisor to talk with me about the steps to go back to school.” – An urban-based low-income parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Value of no-credit classes: To help ease back into the idea of going back to college, several participants found value in non-credit earning programs at community colleges as a means to overcome their anxiety about returning to school. These classes helped them remove some of the internal barriers to going back to school and develop an understanding of how college has changed in 2022. These affordable courses also provide an opportunity to get reacquainted with a subject, like math, after a long hiatus. This can help reduce the anxiety of returning to school with low commitment and low costs.

“I took a no-credit career transitional class. It’s super affordable. \$25 for 6 weeks. It gave me the opportunity to understand the CTC link (Canvas) to hand in assignments and help with time management. It’s great opportunity to get in the mindset of what it looks like to go back to school.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“In the summer, I took a math class – Math 98. It was great to get the hang of what it looks like and not feel like a failure if I don’t get it because it’s not a credited class.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Everett Community College has a lot of support for students starting from zero. I’d like to start with a state certificate for early childhood education. I am able to study English at the same time as earning my degree.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I highly recommend [offering a class with] computer skills. I had no computer skills because I have not been using a computer unless I needed to.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

In-person programs: Several participants acknowledged that they learn better when in-person. This was commonly raised among participants who identify as Black or African American. However, time and income barriers sometimes require online or hybrid classes to be able to fit it all in.

“I’m more hands on. I like to be in class talking and mingling and seeing what I’m doing, showing what I’m doing. I think it’s better hands on. I’m not computer savvy at all.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I like online learning, but I learn better in-person.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

Online/hybrid programs: Due to time constraints and life responsibilities, some participants preferred online classes. Online classes reduce barriers and allow them to join while still balancing life responsibilities. Participants showed interest in flexible online programs that were reasonably priced to build their skills. Some sought flexible training at various locations or self-paced video series.

“Online [courses] would be better. We have work to do, childcare. Online courses make it easy for us.” – An urban-based parenting participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’m looking at Coursera Grow with Google IT certificates. The price is good. I’ve looked into it quite a bit and it’s one of the newer programs. I’m also leaning towards the Comp TAA Certification for entry-level IT, such as a HelpDesk job. It’s a certification, so you can take training at a lot of different places. But I was looking at a popular option called Professor Messer. It’s an online course. You can buy all the study materials and do video series.” – A Wenatchee-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Hybrid [part online/part in person] would be helpful. One day a week or one evening would be nice. For evenings, there is ONE choice, which makes it hard. I’d like to see more options to those who work full-time or at home with kids. Cater to people who are doing more than just going to school full-time. – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Flexible programs to meet different circumstances: The participants discussed the importance of flexibility and options to appeal to adult learners, allowing them to balance the program with the other responsibilities in their lives.

“Learning is all personal. Some can learn faster when they’re on a computer. Some need hands-on teaching. Some need two years; some need six months. You have to do what’s comfortable for you.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“Classes are too long, like two hours. School takes up a lot of time. Sometimes what you learn in books isn’t always applicable to what you need to know.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“Flexibility. A lot of courses start at 7:30am, but I’m an hour-drive from the campus. How do I get out of the house and to Spokane before my kids get to school? There are not a lot of daycare solutions up in Stevens County.” – A rural-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I prefer in-person because I learn a lot. But I also like the computer because online classes work with my job schedule. I was online before the pandemic. You have to have different options for different people.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I would do a college program if it were easier - if I had more time; if it were affordable. I’m even willing to do it if there’s a payment plan. I also would like to do a program that’s more family friendly. I’d like it if my program let me bring my kids. I know it’s hard, but I’ve seen it work before. In general, the program has to be worth the money in the long run.” – A parenting participant based in Tacoma who identifies as Black or African American

“I would do an education or training program if it were set up for working professionals who need to take things at a slower pace without facing consequences or losing their funding. I would also need to get an off-campus job, because on-campus jobs don’t pay enough and don’t have enough hours to cover housing costs. I don’t want to worry about experiencing homelessness.” – A non-parenting participant based in Tacoma who identifies as nonbinary and White/Caucasian

Duration is a primary factor: Many participants described program length as a primary factor to enrolling in education. It was a primary factor while evaluating programs; however, the ideal program duration varied depending on the individual. Participants also had strong interest in short-term certification programs, as that seemed more manageable and offered a tangible product. The ability to combine, ladder, or stack shorter credentials was appealing to some so they felt they could make progress in manageable chunks.

“I would like to spend three years max.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I like learning things by myself, maybe with a 6-month or a 12-month course.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

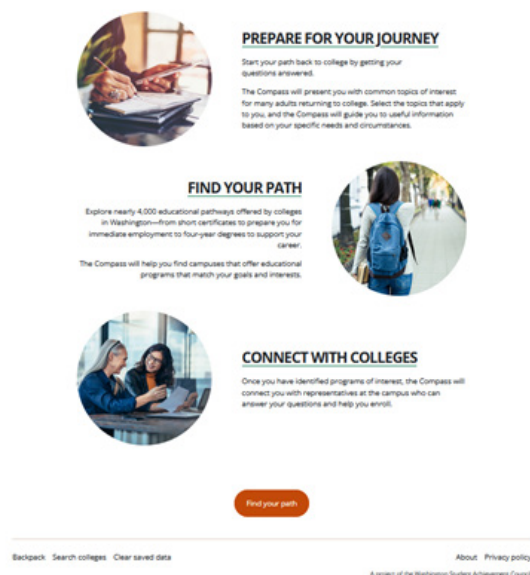
“If the courses are offered online and I know the duration (that is the deciding factor), then I feel like I have the resources as a parent.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’m saving up money to do a 4.5-month nail tech program. I feel like that’s a trade I could possibly do...and it seems feasible. That way I can have a job to fall back on

while I'm going to school. What I'm aiming for takes eight to 10 years. That's a really long time to have to figure out a way to make money to do what I want to do." – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

"It's easier to do shorter classes because you don't need to think ahead so much. I don't know what my kids are going to be doing next year, so it's hard to commit to long programs, because I might not be able to finish them." – A parenting Spanish-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Exhibit 8 College and Career Compass Screenshot, June 2022



Source: WSAC, 2022 <https://compass.wsac.wa.gov/>.

Reflection on the College and Career Compass Tool

Participants were given a link to the College and Career Compass Tool and a verbal overview of the design. They explored the tool independently and reconvened to discuss the various features they explored, what they found useful, and what could be improved.

Easy to use: Many participants found the website and tool relatively easy to use and explore. Participants considered it “logically laid out,” and liked the design and landing page. They specifically highlighted that searching by a specific program was a useful function. They found the website more trustworthy than other resources. They thought it looked helpful and

appreciated the categories and topics that existed. They found it helpful to advise students on how to pay, the childcare category, and how long a program is and its cost. Many would recommend it to a friend.

"I like the design and landing page. There's one button to click on, even if you're not tech-savvy." – A Wenatchee-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

"The tool helped answer some of my questions about attending college as an adult learner." – A Spokane-based participant who identified as White/Caucasian

"It's not perfect but it's helpful." – A Spokane-based participant who identified as White/Caucasian

“It’s relatively easy to use. I mostly just clicked and played around. I found it easier to move where I wanted to go.” – A Spokane-based participant who identified as White/Caucasian

“I felt like I could trust it more than Google.” – A Spokane-based participant who identified as White/Caucasian

“I went straight to ‘How to apply for college?’ because I found it interesting. I like the steps.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identified as Black or African American

“It’s user-friendly. The welcome interface is very lowkey. It’s easy to navigate.” – An urban-based participant who identified as Black or African American

“It’s simple. It doesn’t feel stressful.” – An urban-based participant who identified as Black or African American

Search function: Participants noted the features they liked in the “search” function, including searching by preferences and area of interest. However, many mentioned that the search would only be useful if a user had an overall sense of the types of programs they would be interested in. It was not as useful for someone exploring the idea of going back to school.

“With the search option for colleges, it’s nice to search by area of interest.” – An urban-based participant who identified as Black or African American

“Searching by the program tool was useful. I put in ‘nursing’ and lots of schools came up. But if someone is working on a program and planning on moving, it’s nice to know there are other places where I can work on the program.” – A Spokane-based participant who identified as White/Caucasian

“It’s easy to sort search results based on preferences.... It makes it easy for me to choose.” – An urban-based participant who identified as Black or African American

Plethora of information: Many participants noted how much information was on the website, which might be best suited for those not sure of where they wanted to go.

“I think this is great. It compiles all the information I want to learn, and I can share it with my friends” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“The website contains everything in one group. You can add to your interests according to your preferences. I skimmed through the Backpack, and I thought it was cool.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“It’s nice to have all the information in one place because often I don’t know what I’m missing. So, this is a great way to show me everything.” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“It’s really nice that it lists the time to complete the degree or cert and what you end up with at the end of the program.” – A Wenatchee-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“A lot of people will tell you that you can’t go back to school because it’s too hard. But you can. Having all this information in one place will be very helpful for people who don’t know where to start.” – A Spanish-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Information overload: For many of the participants, they found the Compass tool overwhelming. They noted the lack of clarity in language used, particularly for non-native English speakers, such as the term “backpack.” They also expressed a desire to simplify the site and not offer so many subsections. Some participants got lost in the navigation. Others felt nervous clicking on things without knowing what was being clicked on. Despite the sense that there was a lot of information, some felt that the articles did not offer enough depth to be meaningful and participants expressed that the content felt general or surface level.

“It doesn’t have as much direction as I’d like. You really have to dig. If someone needs a basic understanding or a basic formula, I would not recommend it. For easy answers or easy information, no. For someone who has a clear idea of what they want to do, yes.” – A rural-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“When you’re first starting out, it feels like everything [related to “college”] is the same thing. I’m not sure what is being asked.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Central Asian

“Some of the articles were useful but some just led me on links to other things. But I have a clear idea of where I want to go. It might be more of a benefit if I wasn’t sure where I wanted to go?” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“It feels like you’re chasing the information, especially if someone is eager and thinking about going back to school.... The tips are very general. The websites don’t seem to have genuine content that is actually useful.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“It would be valuable to have a page to go to a main page. It’s stressful to go back-and-forth. Don’t want to open a lot of things and don’t want to be spammed.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“Adult learners don’t want to click on things without knowing what we’re clicking on.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“There’s so much going on here, so I don’t know where to start. I need more help with navigating something like this.” – An urban-based Spanish-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I’ve actually used this tool before. It’s sort of helpful to look for evening classes. It’s not up to date though. The program I was originally looking at is no longer offered. I know it’s hard to keep up with schools since things change so fast, and it’s nice to see all the options and information, but then it’s hard to figure out whether it’s actually feasible. I end up having to contact the schools directly, and it’s so hard to get accurate information from them. They tell me to contact professors, and then the professors don’t respond. I don’t hate this tool, but I also don’t love it.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as nonbinary and White/Caucasian

Desire to engage with someone: As participants reviewed the website, many expressed a desire to engage with someone as soon as possible. Ideas included a virtual chat for navigation support. When discussing how to best be contacted, they advised that text message or email works best. If it is a phone call, they are likely to ignore the contact. Participants desired to connect with a school or campus as soon as possible.

“It would be nice to connect to a school/campus as soon as you can.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“Be more explicit or talk with people. The best way is to talk with people.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“It would be helpful to have a real person available to help you navigate the site.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Southeast Asian

“I like the ability to speak to a representative. You can get a feel for how that campus would be and answer any questions of how it operates.” – A Wenatchee-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and White/Caucasian

More information for exploration: Participants described wanting more specific information on the courses in an area of study, including information about what to expect beyond the average course description and list of initial common costs. Participants also desired practical information about the potential return on investment. For example, the demand for jobs requiring this credential in their labor market, the average wage after graduation, and job placement rates.

“What if it just provided a list of courses based on the area of study? Then someone can research what he finds on the website and decided what he is interested in.... A variety of courses and programs could help identify what someone is interested in, e.g., health. Maybe there could be different courses so you can see what these courses are and what you would do. So, you can build comfort and know what you really want to pursue.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identified as Black or African American

“There needs to be information about the real costs connected to the classes because a class might be free, but the books could be very expensive.” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

More resources and advisors: Participants requested more information on preparation for becoming an adult learner, childcare, and details on the course (e.g., duration, online vs. hybrid). Some participants also sought out personality tests or career quizzes to help determine their future pathway.

“I’d like resources on mental health and something to prepare adult learners, [like] sharing stories and experiences of people and how they stay focused and not drop out along the line. This helps prepare, so you know what you’re signing up for.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“Provide resources on making childcare while also schooling. It could be good information to include in the school profile.” – A Spokane-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“Maybe someone could talk to a new parent and give advice.... Have someone on the site to talk to and help explain and evaluate case-by-case situation.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as Black or African American

“I’d like to know more about how to access free workshops and certificates, I’m not as interested in college information.” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“It would be helpful to see more non-college resources, like from community organizations.” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I would like more information about career paths and how to access them.” – A Spanish-speaking urban-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“I would be interested in some kind of personality quiz or career quiz to help me narrow down my options and find my interests - something to recommend a program or match me to a class.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I think Oregon had a similar website called Oregon Career Information System. I haven’t used it in many years, but I think it has some of the items that folks mentioned, like quizzes or information about types of jobs and education. It might not be the same, since it existed many years ago, but it did include some more personalized quiz type things.” – A Pierce County-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I wish it would include information about where to find materials to practice English writing skills.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Desire for other languages: Many participants expressed concern that the tool was only offered in English. Some noted that not having the tool available in their native language and connected to other non-English resources would make its use difficult, while others thought this would prevent them from using the tool all together.

“Nothing here is very useful to me because it’s all in English. I can’t really use this.” – A Spanish-speaking participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“It would be easier to use this in Spanish - and I need to know which classes are available in Spanish. I would also like it to connect to other resources that are in Spanish, instead of sending me to another English website.” – A Spanish-speaking parenting participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

“Make these resources more accessible with videos in our native language.” – A Mam or Q’anjob’al participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx and Mam or Q’anjob’al

Turning information into action: One participant remarked that it was hard to identify what action to take. They recommended incorporating a checklist of what to do when.

“It could be hard for some to find the right info. It’s hard to bridge the gap between information and action. The tool could have maybe something to help personalize a checklist on what to do when.” – A rural-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Specific recommendations and feedback: The participants had recommendations and suggested features for the website, including:

- Adding a question-and-answer section.
- Making it possible to browse programs and colleges by zip code or area.
- Providing more resources for balancing working full-time and going to school. Other topics include helping people with flexible schedules (e.g., those with children, those who work multiple jobs), resources for childcare, healthcare benefits, and school for diverse populations.
- Providing advice on how to help organize classes and credits.
- Translating the site into different languages.
- Adding more information about career pathways and how to choose a career path. This may include some kind of quiz to help people determine which career path might be best for them.
- Make it easier to engage with someone, via a chat, audio, or video feature.
- Add a virtual chat window to help you navigate through the site from the beginning.
- Be more explicit in the language used, and avoid idioms that might be unfamiliar to non-native English speakers.
- Simplify the subsections.
- Make the page more welcoming and eye-catching. Add colors and pictures, including photos of adult learners.
- Add a link to return to the main page.

- Create a way to permanently save your “Backpack” and progress. When users clear their browser history, the Backpack section of the site is emptied.

Design and feature suggestions: Specific design and feature ideas included: pictures, a contact form on the main page, and being able to add more than one Backpack. A few of the participants commented on the design and preferred more colors or the use of bright colors, as well as bigger letters. Many participants did not like the color choices.

“Pictures would be nice to add.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

“I didn’t see a form of contact. What if I have questions?” – A participant from the individual adult learner focus group

“When I select a university to add to my Backpack, I was expecting to see both universities in my Backpack. But I only saw the last one. Maybe there’s a way to add both to the Backpack.” – An urban-based participant who identifies as White/Caucasian

Participating campuses: A participant suggested contextualizing how many campuses are participating.

“The site talks about participating campuses. Maybe there could be a blurb that says, ‘Of the 1,200 colleges, 100-200 are participating.’ Is it a large amount? Is it a small amount? It could give the learner an idea.” – A Wenatchee-based participant who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx

Implications and Potential Directions

Discussion of study findings with the study Advisory Group highlighted the following implications and potential directions for future work.

Further Focus Populations

This study recruited a broad range of potential adult learners across Washington State. The result was a great deal of interest and engagement from some groups and less from others. Both have implications for further study.

To reach specific focus populations not included in significant numbers in this study, organizations may need to design future studies with that intentional emphasis.

- **Rural adult learners from Chelan and Douglas Counties:** This study did not draw a large number of participants from the Chelan and/or Douglas counties. One hypothesis is that the groups were conducted at an especially busy time for agricultural work (April-June). To connect with participants from these counties in future studies, especially those who are rural-based and identify as Hispanic or Latinx, consider the agricultural season. Offering an in-person focus group on weekends (Sunday afternoons) can also increase accessibility for this group as well.
- **Native American and Indigenous adult learners:** Indigenous data sovereignty is the right of Indigenous nations to retain ownership over their citizen's data and the power to determine how that data is used. Native American and Indigenous participation in other state government studies can be limited by concerns about how that data will be used, in addition to capacity and "survey fatigue" barriers as these groups are the frequent focus of requests for data. Direct relationships with specific Tribal leaders and a clear understanding of how the data will be collected, shared between entities, and used may aid future recruitment.

Other groups were prevalent in the study and point to potential directions related to focusing adult learner interventions.

- **Early childcare providers:** Early childcare providers and individuals expressing an interest in a career in early childhood education were common in the focus groups.

The state has recently emphasized the need for credentials for state-funded childcare creating both barriers and opportunities in this field. At the same time, there is great unmet demand for childcare. This group of adult learners' access to further education could be important to study further and "solve for."

Potential State Policy and Program Directions

Examine short certificate ineligibility for financial aid: Many adult learners discussed pursuing short-term certificates and survey classes as a primary access point to postsecondary schooling; however, these programs are ineligible for financial aid. At the local level, continuing efforts to make these on-ramps low- to no- cost will be important. The state could also explore grants to colleges to support the low- to no- cost on-ramp programs and consider whether the Washington College Grant could be used to fund shorter certificate programs, similar to what is being considered in the Bipartisan Innovation Act federally to include a short-term Pell program.

Streamline financial aid processes: Some work is already underway to consider certain recipients of services programs via data sharing agreement with DSHS automatically eligible for financial aid. This could alleviate a significant navigation burden from adult learners and well as give them financial resources to pursuing postsecondary education.

Connect Compass Tool with other state resources: Reaching adult learners is interconnected with other social services and state resources. To maximize outreach, a recommendation is to index the Compass Tool in 211 for those accessing related resources and gather additional data about where referrals are coming from.

Potential Directions for Resources and Tools

Increase access to resources for multilingual adult learners: There are many opportunities to increase access to existing resources for multilingual learners. Digital platforms, such as the Compass Tool and campus websites can be analyzed through a multilingual lens, provide translations, and ensure the "Translate" button is easy to locate. On-campus, translations are important for multilingual learners in the classroom as well as the navigation, financial aid, and administrative tools.

Map out and communicate financial aid possibilities: Given adult learners' concerns surrounding financial aid and loan programs, they may require additional reassurances to demonstrate that financial aid is accessible to them. There is also a common misperception that financial aid is only available to students coming directly from high school. Leverage College Bound conversations and communications to high school juniors and seniors, to ensure

that their parents also see they are eligible. One way to reassure adult learners is to map out the aid available to Washington State residents to demonstrate how the first year of school can be paid for through financial aid. South Seattle Community College previously did a media push that helped demonstrate how financial aid can be maximized as a Washington State resident.

Utilize the network of community-based ambassadors as trusted influencers and communicators: Adult learners value connecting with trusted individuals and communicators throughout the educational process. A possible direction is to strategically tap into networks of community-based ambassadors and alumni networks to provide key information to potential adult learners.

Potential Local and Regional Directions

Strengthen the connection and information connecting educational programs with local job market data: Given that education decisions are tightly bound with financial decisions for adult learners, they weigh the cost of education against the potential return on investment. A possible direction is to increase access to local job market data so that prospective students and navigators can easily determine the return on investment related to position information, salary, and market outlook. A supplementary strategy is to tap into alumni networks and recent graduates to provide similar information based on personal experience.

Adopt a multiprong strategy to build and strengthen partnerships beyond the educational sector: To reach adult learners, it requires additional partners beyond educational practitioners, including those in the employment, education, early childhood, and health networks. These partnerships might have the most impact when coordinated at a local or regional level. Potential partners include Workforce, private sector employers for training opportunities, Career Connect Washington, Community Action Agencies, Early Learning Coalition, and school districts.

References

Washington Student Achievement Council. (2021). 2021 Strategic Action Plan. Olympia: WSAC.