

RETURNING ADULTS FACTSHEET



Who are returning adult students?

Adult students make up a growing share of today's students, including adults returning to school, who are likely to be in their late 20s or 30s.

37%

of all college students are **over the age of 25**.



1 in 10

college students are aged 40 or older.



Of students who returned and completed degrees,

32%

were **between ages 24 and 29**, and

34%

were **in their 30s** at completion.¹

30 years old



The median age of students who return to school and complete degrees.²

A portion of students with some college but no degree later re-enroll as returning adult students.

HOW MANY ADULTS RETURN TO SCHOOL?

3.8 million

former students returned to higher ed between 2013 and 2018.³



25%

of those students have since graduated.



29%

were still enrolled as of December 2018.



Which makes a

54%

combined success/progress rate among returning students

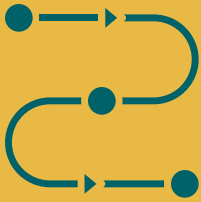




DID YOU KNOW?

36 million

Americans have some college credit but no degree or credential.⁴



Women are more likely to return to school and complete than men.

Of students with some college but no degree,

14% of women re-enroll **vs.** **12%** of men.⁵



Of students who return to school and complete their programs,

54% are women.⁶



Returning adult African-American students earn degrees at higher rates than national samples of college graduates.

African-American students who returned to school make up



25% **vs.** **16%**

of bachelor's degree earners

in the national sample which includes people of all races and ethnicities.⁷

African-American returning students made up



32% **vs.** **23%**

of associate degree earners

in the national sample.

Adult students are more likely to receive a Pell Grant than their younger peers.

PELL GRANTS

Almost

1/2

(47% and 43%, respectively) of adult students aged 24 to 29 and 30 to 39 were Pell Grant recipients

vs.

36%

of younger students.⁸

The amount of time returning adult students were re-enrolled previously matters, as does their major.

Students with at least

2 years of college



completed are

2x as likely to return to school than those who complete one term.⁹

Returning adult students who re-enroll at the same school and in the same major as their first time have higher completion rates than students who switch schools when they return.¹⁰



Adult students are more likely to return to school part-time, online, at public institutions, and at two-year institutions.

INSTITUTION TYPE, ENROLLMENT STATUS, AND MODE OF LEARNING

PRIVATE/PUBLIC

75%

of returning students re-enroll at public institutions.¹¹



ENROLLMENT STATUS

The average age of part-time students is

27.2 years



66%

of part-time students are over the age of 24.

ONLINE/IN-PERSON

80%

of students enrolled in online programs were 25 years old or older.

10%

of returning students who complete degrees do so online.¹²



COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Nearly **6** out of **10**

returning students re-enrolled in two-year community colleges.¹³

60%

of students surveyed who re-enrolled and completed earned an associate degree or sub-baccalaureate credential.¹⁴

Many adult students returning to school are balancing raising kids with their coursework.

STUDENT PARENTS

Nearly **1** in **4** all students are parents.¹⁵



3 in **5** student parents are ages¹⁶

30+



The older the adult student, the more likely they are to work while in school.

WORK STATUS¹⁷

Full-time Undergraduate Employment Rates

56%

aged 25-29

56%

aged 30-39

61%

aged 40-49

72%

aged 50-64

What motivates returning adult students? What are the challenges adult students face?

Adult students persisted in school during COVID at higher rates than younger peers, but still struggled to complete degrees.



What can policymakers do to better serve returning adult students?

Check out our [Pell Lifetime Eligibility Usage \(LEU\) Reset 1-pager](#), [Satisfactory Academic Progress \(SAP\) Reset 1-pager](#), and our [Policy Toolkit](#) to learn more.

Adult students (aged 25+) showed a

2-3%

gain in Spring 2021 at public four-year and private nonprofit four-year colleges.

48%

of adult students complete their programs within

6 years

VS.

64%

of younger students.¹⁸



Affordability can be a barrier for returning adult students, but they do see earnings on par with younger students when they graduate.

Roughly

60%

of U.S. adults have considered returning to college.



70%

say they couldn't afford it.¹⁹



Students who leave college without a degree are more than

2x

as likely to default on their student loans.²⁰

50% of adult students

earn between \$24,000-\$90,000

VS.

49%

of younger students.²¹

ENDNOTES

¹ https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND_Report_2019.pdf

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019487.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.189.232/68k.552.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Comebackers-Odyssey.pdf>

¹¹ https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND_Report_2019.pdf

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/C481_Parents-in-College-By-the-Numbers-Aspen-Ascend-and-IWPR.pdf

¹⁶ https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/C481_Parents-in-College-By-the-Numbers-Aspen-Ascend-and-IWPR.pdf

¹⁷ <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ssa>

¹⁸ https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Completions_Report_2020.pdf

¹⁹ <https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/adult-learner/adult-learners-who-they-are-what-they-want-from-college/>

²⁰ <https://www.aauw.org/app/uploads/2020/03/DeeperinDebt-nsa.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/12/04/college-graduates-age-doesnt-hurt-income>

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