How to Increase Enrollment By Better Understanding Prospective Graduate Students

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Dean, Graduate College, Northern Arizona University
Northern Arizona University in Brief

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

A public research university in Flagstaff, Arizona with a total enrollment of 31,000 students

NAU Graduate College
- 125 graduate degree and certificate programs
- 3,995 students enrolled
- $3M in graduate assistantship and tuition waiver funding
1. A Pivotal Moment in Graduate Enrollment

2. Understanding the Shifting Adult Learner Mindset

3. Designing Graduate Programs for Growth

4. Break

5. Interactive Diagnostic Activity

6. Conclusion and Q&A
An Increasingly Challenging Landscape

**College Capacity Has Grown…**
Total 4-Year Degree-Granting Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2,774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3,039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>3,004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**…Amid Growing Doubt Over Value…**
Google searches for: “Is College Worth It?”

- **2004:** avg debt at graduation of $18,550
- **2014:** avg debt at graduation of $28,950

**…With Far Fewer Students on the Horizon**
Projected Decline in Students Attending Regional Four-Year Colleges and Universities, 2017-2029

- **Regional:**
  - Research universities & liberal arts colleges ranked outside of Top 100 (USNWR rankings)
  - 0% to 10% growth
  - -1% to -9% decline
  - -10% to -19% decline
  - over -20% decline

# Anticipating “Winners” and “Losers”

Regional Institutions Have Just a Decade to Escape a Looming “Death Spiral”

## Enrollment Outlook 2017-2029

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Regional Institutions</th>
<th>National Institutions</th>
<th>Elite Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research universities and liberal arts colleges ranked outside of Top 100 (USNWR rankings)</td>
<td>Top 50-100 research universities, Top 50-100 liberal arts colleges (USNWR rankings)</td>
<td>Top 50 research universities, Top 50 liberal arts colleges (USNWR rankings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent change in demand</td>
<td>-11%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>+8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total change in demand</td>
<td>-152K</td>
<td>-22K</td>
<td>+12K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## The First Signs...

28% of publics  43% of privates

Percent of institutions that missed enrollment and net tuition revenue goals in 2016

Optimism in Master’s and Online Programs

Programs Oriented Toward Older Students Will Continue to See Growth

**Growth in Students Age 25-34**
2007-2017, NCES

- 15%
  - All institutions
- 620K
  - Total students

**Growth in Online-Only Students**
2013-2017, EAB Research

- 47%
  - Public 4-years
- 42%
  - Private non-profit 4-years

**Growth in Master’s Conferrals**
2007-2017, NCES

- 25%
  - All institutions
- 160K
  - Total graduates

**More Growth on the Horizon**
NCES Projections Through 2026

- 11%
  - Projected growth students age 25-34
- 22%
  - Projected growth master’s degrees

Many Institutions Seeking Adult Learner Growth

Tracking the Market
EAB Research

10-25%
Recent increases in online program growth targets

Provosts Considering Big Moves to Capitalize on the Opportunity

“We need to grow our professional and master’s programs to offset the pressure on undergrad net tuition. But it feels like we are behind.”

-Provost, Private University

“We are at $50M in online tuition revenue. How do we get to $100M?”

-Provost, Public Flagship

Source: EAB research and analysis.
No Surprise, Added Competition for Students

Program Growth Outpacing Student Growth, Driving Up Recruitment Costs

Growth in Graduate Programs vs. Students

**Online Graduate**
2013-2017, EAB Research

- Public 4-year Students: 46%
- Public 4-year Programs: 58%
- Private 4-year Students: 43%
- Private 4-year Programs: 65%

**Ground-Based Graduate**
2013-2017, EAB Research

- Public 4-year Students: 4%
- Public 4-year Programs: 12%
- Private 4-year Students: 5%
- Private 4-year Programs: 14%

Explosive Program Growth Wreaking Havoc on Recruiting Expenses

Increased cost per click for graduate programs from 2009-2014

Source: EAB analysis of NCES IPEDS Fall Enrollment Data File 2013 and 2017; EAB interviews and analysis
A Maturing Adult Market Demands a Strategic Approach to Growth

**Prioritizing and Designing Programs for Growth**

**Entering the Era of Smart Growth**

- **Pre-Growth**: No major investment
- **Expansion**: Rapid investment to capture the land grab
- **Maturity**: Disciplined investment in a limited number of high-value opportunities

**Adapting to Smart Growth**

*Tough Questions Leaders Must Answer*

- What current programs have growth potential?
- How do we design our programs to be competitive in the market?
- What are the best areas for new expansion?
- How do we develop a sound online strategy?
1. A Pivotal Moment in Graduate Enrollment
2. Understanding the Shifting Adult Learner Mindset
3. Designing Graduate Programs for Growth
4. Break
5. Interactive Diagnostic Activity
6. Conclusion and Q&A
Research to Support Graduate Program Growth

EAB’s Survey of Current and Prospective Adult Learners

How We Defined “Adult Learners”

- Current and prospective students of graduate, undergraduate degree completion, online, and certificate programs

Why We Conducted This Research

- To help institutional leaders better understand the perceptions, motivations, and behaviors of today’s adult learners

1) Students considering or currently enrolled in graduate programs comprised 69% of all survey respondents.
Understanding How Adult Learners Think

Sample Questions Explored

What **motivates** adult learners to apply and enroll?

What **factors** do adult learners value when choosing programs?

What **prevents** interested students from applying?

**Today’s Discussion: Three Key Themes That Emerged**

1. Adult learners require a **return on their education**.
2. Adult learners are **extremely pragmatic**.
3. Adult learners **require flexible options**.
Theme #1

Adult learners require a return on their education.
A Climate That Drives Cost Consciousness

Influenced by the Student Loan Crisis and a Strong Economy

Student Debt Looms Large in Public Discourse

$1.5 trillion
Dollars owed in US student loan debt


I’m a Doctor and Even I Can’t Afford My Student Loans
August 2018

While School Becomes Less Appealing with Strong Employment Options

US Unemployment Rate, November 2009-November 2018

Cost Is the Top Barrier to Enrollment

Responses from Students Without Immediate Plans to Enroll

Students Who Are Not Planning to Enroll in Adult Learner Programs within Two Years

Q: What, if anything, would change your plans?

- More affordable tuition: 49.6%
- Opportunity to earn more money: 29.3%
- More flexible education options: 28.5%
- Change in career: 21.9%
- No standardized test requirement: 12.0%
- Easier application process: 9.9%
- Other: 9.9%
- Nothing would change my plans: 2.1%

Students Who Are Undecided or Open to Enrolling at Some Point

Q: What is the primary reason you are not pursuing more education at this time?

- Cost of attending: 39.6%
- Current family responsibilities: 23.1%
- Professional/work-related commitments: 21.6%
- Required prerequisites: 5.2%
- Past academic performance: 1.5%
- Other: 9.0%
### Finances Influence Where Students Enroll

Responses from Students Who Plan to Enroll or Who Are Currently Enrolled

#### Which Factors Are Most Important in Students’ Enrollment Decisions?

*Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale, where 5 = extremely important and 1 = not at all important.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Important Factors</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program accreditation</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost of attending</strong></td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid/scholarships</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Important Factors</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical facilities</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No prerequisites to enroll in the program</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of the school</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Students Prefer Lower-Tuition Options

69% of participants considered public institutions vs. 41% of participants considered private institutions.
Adult Learners Rely Heavily on Financial Aid

Share of Students Receiving Institutional or Employer Support

- Financial aid/loans and grants: 54.6%
- Scholarships: 39.7%
- My employer/tuition reimbursement plan: 21.7%
- Graduate assistantships: 11.5%
- Other institutional support: 6.2%

Many Adult Learners Are Reliant on Institutional Support

Students Currently Receiving Financial Aid and/or Grants from Their Institution

- Could continue without financial support: 18.4%
- Require full tuition support: 37.8%
- Require some financial support: 41.6%
- Other: 2.2%

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The Flip Side: Career and Finances as Motivators

Interest in Education Is Primarily Driven by Career and Finances

Q: What would you say is your primary reason for furthering your education?

- To advance my career: 30.8%
- To pursue my interests in more depth: 23.3%
- To change careers: 11.0%
- To increase my earning potential: 11.0%
- To get a better job than I could without the degree/certificate: 7.9%
- To learn new information/skills: 11.3%
- To pursue my interests in more depth: 23.3%
- Other: 4.6%

60.8% named career or financial factors

Career or financial factors
Implications and Campus Perspective
Theme #2

Adult learners are pragmatic.
Concerns about Value and Time Lead to a Pragmatic Approach

Uncertain About Value of Enrolling
“What if I get to the end of the application process and decide not to enroll anywhere?”

Pressed to Find the Time to Apply
“How will I find time to finish my applications while I’m working full-time and taking care of my family?”

Approaching the Application Process Strategically
“How can I make sure I’m not wasting time on unnecessary tasks?”
Most Adult Learners Are Applying to <3 Schools

The Number of Schools Applied to Decreases by Age

Number of Schools/Programs Applied To

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥10</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Younger Prospects Tend to Apply to More Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>10 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 26</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 35</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

64% of participants applied to 2 or fewer schools
### A Downward Trend in Test-Taking

**Fewer Prospects Are Taking Admissions Tests Now Than Were Previously**

#### Four in Ten Adult Learners in 2018 Hadn’t Taken an Admissions Test

*Participants Who Planned to Enroll or Were Currently Enrolled*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GRE</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSAT</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMAT</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not taken any</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not plan to take any</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### A Decrease in Test-Taking Since 2016

*EAB 2016 Survey vs. EAB 2018 Survey*

Increased share of students responding “I have not taken any graduate admissions tests.”

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Approaching Tests with a Plan in Mind

Test-Takers Have Researched Options and Tend to Enroll Within One Year

Most Students Knew Where They Would Apply Before Taking a Test

- Did not know 28.8%
- Did know 69.2%
- Don’t remember 1.9%

Over 75% of Students Enrolled Within One Year of Taking an Admissions Test

Q: Approximately how long after you took your most recent graduate admission test did you enroll in a program?

- Less than 6 months: 47.9%
- 6 months to a year: 28.8%
- 1 to 2 years: 9.6%
- 2 years or more: 11.0%
- Conditionally enrolled first: 2.7%
Implications and Campus Perspective
Theme #3

Adult learners require flexible options.
Students Increasingly Embracing Online Options

Online Needed to Appeal to Adult Learners in Today’s Competitive Market

Graduate Students Enrolled in at Least One Distance Course
Fall 2012-2017, Degree-Granting, Title IV Participating, US Institutions

- 2012: 783,544
- 2013: 842,541
- 2014: 940,783
- 2015: 1,011,938
- 2016: 1,095,779
- 2017: 1,142,919

+46%
A Substantial Enrollment Obstacle

Family and Work Commitments Prevent Interested Prospects from Enrolling

What Prevents Interested Prospects from Pursuing Their Education Further?

Participants Who Indicated an Interest in Enrolling, but Not Within the Next Two Years

- Cost of attending: 39.6%
- Current family responsibilities: 23.1%
- Professional/work-related commitments: 21.6%
- Other: 9.0%
- Past academic performance: 1.5%
- Required prerequisites: 5.2%

45% say family and work-related commitments are the top reason they’re not pursuing education.
## Flexible and Online Options That Ranked as Somewhat to Very Important in Enrollment Decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of program/time required for degree completion</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online support services (e.g., application for admission, payments, class registration)</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible scheduling (e.g., part-time, evening, weekend)</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time program</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint or hybrid programs (e.g., online and in class)</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designed for executives/professionals (e.g., weekend program)</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expedited program</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale, where 5 = extremely important and 1 = not at all important.

1 in 2 prospects considered online options when researching programs.
Especially Appealing to Older Adult Learners

Importance of Flexible Options Increases with Age of Student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Prospects Who Considered Online Options by Age</th>
<th>Mean Importance of Flexible/Online Options by Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 26</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 35</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Implications and Campus Perspective
1. A Pivotal Moment in Graduate Enrollment

2. Understanding the Shifting Adult Learner Mindset

3. Designing Graduate Programs for Growth

4. Break

5. Interactive Diagnostic Activity

6. Conclusion and Q&A
Adults Learners Are Savvy Decision-Makers

Program Structure and Design Matter at Every Stage of the Student Journey

The Student Journey to Enrollment

Awareness

Students are gathering information, primarily through online self-shopping

Sample Factor Considered:

Program Modality

➢ “I’m thinking about getting an online master’s in engineering. Does my undergrad alma mater have that?”

Consideration

Students are actively considering a range of schools and programs

Sample Factor Considered:

Program Price

➢ “Which of the MS Ed programs in my area are most affordable?”

Decision

Students are narrowing down options and deciding where to apply

Sample Factor Considered:

Application Requirements

➢ “I can apply to two of the programs on my list now with my GRE score, but for the other two, I’d have to take the GMAC first.”
## Top Factors to Consider When Evaluating Your Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree Name</strong></td>
<td>Does degree name resonate in the market place? Do concentrations/specializations increase attractiveness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Market</strong></td>
<td>Admissions requirements should consider career changers as well as career enhancers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Program Structure** | • Credits  
                     • Courses  
                     • Time to Complete  
                     • Starts  
                     • Terms  
                     • Prerequisite(s)  
                     • Delivery |
| **Tuition**     | Evaluate list price against that of competitors                                                                                             |
| **Selectivity**| Evaluate average test scores against those of competitors                                                                                   |
| **Residency**  | Evaluate residency against that of competitors, consider students studying at a distance                                                   |
## Finding the Data to Assess Your Programs

### Sample Analyses for a Public University in the Midwest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPEDS</th>
<th>Degree Conferrals</th>
<th>Bureau of Labor Statistics</th>
<th>Online Program Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s in Nuclear Engineering</td>
<td>Occupational Outlook</td>
<td>Online Programs Offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Projected Occupational Growth</td>
<td>Master’s in Mechanical Engineering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IPEDS Degree Conferrals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Avg % Change 2013-2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>-6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>-5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>-6.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Bureau of Labor Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projected Occupational Growth</th>
<th>% Change in Job Openings 2016-2026</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Engineering Managers</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomedical Engineers</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide Engineering Managers</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomedical Engineers</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Online Programs Offered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Programs Offered</th>
<th>Avg % Change 2013-2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Assessment

- **IPEDS**: Red
- **Bureau of Labor Statistics**: Yellow
- **Online Programs Offered**: Green
Successful Curriculum Models Must Be Scalable

Part-Time Scheduling Accommodates Adult Learners and Financial Aid

Sample Curriculum Model

Considerations
- Does the curriculum model align to program outcomes and sequencing?
- Will the model allow for multiple entry points?
- How will faculty and instructional resources align to the model?
- Can the model be accommodated by the institution's academic calendar?
## Strategic Schedule of Courses Requires Planning

Align Faculty Resources with Student Demand to Optimize Investment

### Sample Schedule of Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admission Group 1</td>
<td>CRSE 1</td>
<td>CRSE 2</td>
<td>CRSE 3</td>
<td>CRSE 4</td>
<td>CRSE 5</td>
<td>CRSE 6</td>
<td>CRSE 7</td>
<td>CRSE 8</td>
<td>CRSE 9</td>
<td>CAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission Group 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CRSE 1</td>
<td>CRSE 2</td>
<td>CRSE 5</td>
<td>CRSE 6</td>
<td>CRSE 7</td>
<td>CRSE 8</td>
<td>CRSE 3</td>
<td>CRSE 4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 C</td>
<td>25 C</td>
<td>50 C</td>
<td>50 C</td>
<td>75 C</td>
<td>75 C</td>
<td>100 C</td>
<td>100 C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sections (25 enrollments each)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Headcount</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Hypothetical Enrollments

- **Fall 2018**: 25
- **Spring 2019**: 25
- **Summer 2019**: 50
- **Fall 2019**: 75
- **Spring 2020**: 100

125 Potential Students by 2020
Snapshot of NAU’s Institutional Journey

From Faculty-Centered to **Student-Centered**
1. A Pivotal Moment in Graduate Enrollment
2. Understanding the Shifting Adult Learner Mindset
3. Designing Graduate Programs for Growth
4. Break
5. Interactive Diagnostic Activity
6. Conclusion and Q&A
Adult Learner

Program Planning Diagnostic

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### Adult Learner Program Planning Diagnostic

**Does Your Program Design Support Graduate and Online Enrollment Growth?**

---

#### Curriculum Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective courses for major programs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program meets success criteria</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students receive support and assistance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program is flexible and responsive to student needs and expectations</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Initial Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial enrollment rate in line with your overall enrollment target</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial enrollment rate meeting minimum and maximum enrollment levels</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Adult Learner Recruitment
1. A Pivotal Moment in Graduate Enrollment
2. Understanding the Shifting Adult Learner Mindset
3. Designing Graduate Programs for Growth
4. Break
5. Interactive Diagnostic Activity
6. Conclusion and Q&A
Key Takeaways

1. Be **student-centric** in program structure and design
2. Ensure decisions are informed by your **market and competitors**
3. Align **resources with demand** to optimize for growth