

An analysis of inquiry, nonstart, and drop reasons in nontraditional university student populations

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InsideTrack has coached more than 250,000 students at more than 50 campuses nationally, enabling universities to increase student engagement, persistence, and success.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on a new data source, this study identifies key factors that influence enrollment (yield) and graduation rates among adult college students—including the importance of referrals, finances, and external commitments—and recommends ways for universities offering continuing education programs to increase yield and student success.

The new data for this study is drawn from records of structured InsideTrack Coaching sessions that adhere to a standardized, research-based methodology. Using data from more than 57,000 adult prospective students, InsideTrack identifies the factors that lead adult students to inquire at an institution and subsequently lead some of them to choose not to enroll. Using data from more than 45,000 enrolled students, the study also identifies factors that cause some students to drop out before completing their studies.

While earlier research has addressed the influence of these factors on specific campuses, this study's data reflects student populations across multiple universities and at key decision-making points throughout the academic year.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities that offer continuing education programs need to understand the adult student's decision-making process. Effective enrollment management, program design, and outreach depend on knowing what factors drive prospective students to inquire at an institution, why some choose not to enroll, and why some who enroll eventually drop out before graduating.

Individual colleges and universities learn from interactions with their own prospects and students, but do not have access to the broader, cross-university population. Some earlier academic research studies have looked at student decision making across institutions, but lack ongoing, in-depth interaction with students during the decision, enrollment, and enrolled periods.

This paper presents results from a unique data source: one-on-one structured coaching sessions with prospective, new, and enrolled students. InsideTrack, the nation's premier provider of student coaching services, has a rigorous, empirically grounded methodology for improving student engagement, persistence, and success. InsideTrack Coaches have worked with more than 250,000 students at more than 50 campuses nationally, helping them address the issues that prevent them from enrolling or from succeeding once enrolled.

InsideTrack Coaches record this data during coaching sessions, using InsideTrack's student management system. This information gives InsideTrack partner universities deep insights into student concerns, attitudes, and behavior—all of which inform strategic decisions about recruiting, student life, and program offerings.

This study looks, for the first time, at data drawn from multiple schools. The sample was drawn from 17 colleges and universities; it includes more than 57,000 prospective nontraditional students and more than 45,000 enrolled nontraditional students.

PRIOR RESEARCH

The current literature on the motivation and needs of nontraditional students has identified several factors that differentiate the adult learner from traditional-age students.

Why adult students return to school

Prior research has shown that career advancement is the most common reason adult students return to school across all age groups (Sandeen 2008, Broekemier 2002). Broekemier found that adults were more often interested in changing employers than other age groups. Sandeen found that "Gen Xers" (born between 1961 and 1981) were more often looking to acquire skills that could help them find a new job than either "Baby Boomers" (born between 1943 and 1960) or "Millennials" (born between 1982 and 2003), and that Baby Boomers were more often preparing for a part-time career in retirement than younger cohorts. Both Gen Xers and Millennials, though, were more often looking to advance in their current career compared with Baby Boomers.

Digilio (1998, cited in Broekemier) felt that the adult learner's reasons for returning to school were driven by more complex needs than those of the traditional-age student, including personal networking, serving others, escaping boredom, and personal interest. However, Sandeen (2008) found that "connecting and networking with people" and "learning for fun and enrichment," while important for all age groups, were less common than career advancement in every group.

Why adult students inquire and enroll

When looking at adult prospective students' reasons for interest in a particular institution, a wide variety of studies tend to agree on the top criteria. Availability of a program matching the student's purpose for attending (Sandeen 2008, Noel-Levitz CAEL 2009, Broekemier 2002) and convenience, including time and place of course →

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offerings (NPEC 2007, Levine and Cureton 1998), top the list.

Other frequently mentioned factors include quality of the program (EduVentures 2008, Levine and Cureton 1998), cost and financing (EduVentures 2008, Noel-Levitz CAEL 2009, NPEC 2007, Broekemier 2002, Levine and Cureton 1998), institution reputation (EduVentures 2008, Noel-Levitz CAEL 2009, Broekemier 2002), and program type/mode of delivery (Sandeen 2008, Noel-Levitz CAEL 2009).

Some research suggests that older students are much less influenced by others than are traditional-age students. Broekemier (2002) found that the influence of friends and family ranked last among factors for all age groups.

The reasons adult students choose not to enroll after inquiring do not appear to have been covered by prior published research. For enrollment management professionals, this insight is the critical “other side of the coin” to Inquiry Reasons, and it might be that the continuing education community has assumed that Nonstart Reasons would be a subset of Inquiry Reasons. If so, this study surfaced several surprising findings.

Why adult students do not graduate

Attrition in postsecondary education is an active field of research and has a solid theoretical basis. Differences in attrition patterns between adult and traditional students have been documented in the literature. Nontraditional students are more influenced by external factors than by the social integration variables that affect traditional student attrition (Bean and Metzner 1985). These external factors result in education becoming a secondary activity for nontraditional students (Kerka 1989).

Wylie (2004) augments factors taken from Tinto's Student Integration Model and Bean's Student Attrition Model with external factors that have an impact on the nontraditional student, including hours of employment, family responsibilities, and career advancement. Wylie posits that the adult student weighs these criteria when making the original decision to enroll and that attrition results from a re-evaluation of these criteria at various critical periods.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study is drawn from the InsideTrack student management system, which maintains records of structured coaching sessions between InsideTrack Coaches and students. Using a standardized, research-based methodology,

Coaches record the data during each one-on-one coaching session. Three data items are of particular relevance to this study:

- **Inquiry Reason** captures the primary reason(s) for the student's inquiry at the school. The system also includes a field for Secondary Inquiry Reasons.
- **Nonstart Reason** contains the reason a student chooses not to enroll at the school. A Nonstart Subcategory field captures narrative detail about the student's reason for not enrolling.
- **Drop Reason** stores the reason a student left the program before graduation. A Secondary Drop Reason field is also available.

Two aspects of this data are important in considering their validity:

1. **Data source.** First, the information is not simply student responses to survey questions. Instead, the data is the result of a series of ongoing interactions between the student and his or her Coach, as they work together to identify and address issues that could prevent the student from enrolling or from succeeding in a program in which they are enrolled. Based on these interactions, InsideTrack Coaching sessions produce a rich source of reliable information about the challenges and opportunities that students actually encounter. As a simple example, a prospective student might inquire about course availability, but might then spend most of the conversation discussing financial aid or online access; the Coach will capture the full content of this interaction.
2. **Data context.** Second, the data is captured by well-trained professional Coaches who are experienced in interacting with students and are able to identify the actual factors driving a particular behavior. The Coach's goal is not to capture data for research, but to help the student overcome any obstacles to success. In many cases, the student's initial response is typically not the underlying reason driving behaviors.

In addition, the study includes student demographic data—gender, age, and race and ethnicity—for use in the analysis.

Sample

The study sample consists of two discrete data sets—that is, a separate set of records for prospective students and for enrolled students. More than 57,000 prospective student records contain Inquiry and/or Nonstart Reasons, and more than 45,000 enrolled student records are the source of Drop Reason data. The students →

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had inquired at or were enrolled in 17 universities or colleges.

The policies of InsideTrack partner universities vary regarding the sharing of student demographic information, so not all records contain the same data sets. Specifically, of the combined 102,000 student records, approximately 43,000 have Gender data, 23,000 contain information on Race/Ethnicity, and 31,000 capture Age.

We compared our sample with national demographic data drawn from the 2008 Spring and Fall Enrollment Components. Our sample includes a slightly greater number of Hispanic students than that of the national average, but it is otherwise similar to Gender and Race/Ethnicity distributions for students age 25 and older throughout the United States. Our sample is deliberately slanted toward adult students, but the age distribution is similar to that contained within the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System for students age 25 and older.

Analysis

We analyzed three questions—Inquiry Reason, Nonstart Reason, and Drop Reason—first aggregating data for all students and then analyzing findings by Gender and Age groups.

- **Overall rankings.** For each question, we ranked overall responses, calculating the percentage of total student records specific to each reason. We also calculated 99 percent confidence intervals for each percentage, and note “breaks” in the rankings where confidence intervals do not overlap.
- **Ranking by gender.** We then analyzed each question by gender. We ranked responses for each gender, including percentages. We then tested the null hypothesis that the proportion of respondents giving a particular reason was the same for both genders, and rejected the null hypothesis for any cases in which the adjusted probability was less than or equal to .05.
- **Ranking by age group.** We also split the sample into three age groups: Under 25, 25–39 years of age, and 40 and Over. We ranked responses within each age group, and listed the percent age of records giving each reason. For each reason, we tested the null hypothesis that the proportion of respondents giving a particular reason was the same for the Under 25 and 25–39 age groups. We also tested the null hypothesis that the proportion of respondents giving a particular reason was the same for the 25–39 and 40 and Over groups. We rejected

the null hypothesis if the adjusted probability was less than or equal to .05.

Because the Gender and Age analyses involve multiple simultaneous tests, we applied the Bonferroni correction to the calculated probabilities. We rejected the null hypothesis only if this adjusted p value was less than or equal to .05.

Comment on the sample

A consideration when generalizing the study results to the national population is that the study cohorts were not randomly selected from the national population. Specifically, all students in the sample had voluntarily chosen to participate in InsideTrack Coaching. Moreover, all schools involved in the study had also chosen to offer InsideTrack Coaching to their students. Neither of these conditions is true of the entire national population. However, we are confident that these results could be replicated with any school that chose to offer InsideTrack Coaching and with those students who chose to participate.

RESULTS

The following paragraphs discuss the data on the reasons given when students inquire at a particular university, why some choose not to enroll, and why others fail to graduate—including differences in reasons given by age group and/or gender.

Inquiry reasons: summary

Referrals are the top factor driving inquiries, although Convenience and Availability of Program fit within the same 99 percent confidence interval. This finding is not consistent with Broekemier’s study (2002), perhaps because that study included students at two-year schools and this study does not.

Four of the top seven Inquiry Reasons (Convenience, Location, Class Format, and Flexible Scheduling) and three of the top five involve fit with lifestyle. These findings are consistent with prior research. Finances is barely among the top ten Inquiry Reasons. Based on these findings, continuing education professionals might consider investing in programs that generate referrals (e.g., word-of-mouth marketing, social-network marketing). Likewise, ensuring that programs are offered in a way that fits with the adult student lifestyle is critical when trying to attract students.

Inquiry Reasons did not vary much by gender. Convenience was more important for females while Admissions Requirements were slightly more important for males, as was Ease →

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of Process. In general, however, the same influencers apply to both genders. (Figure 1a-1b)

Minor differences in inquiry reasons by age group

Similarly, the differences between adult students' reasons for inquiring at a particular university and those for the Under 25 age group were not statistically significant. The same was true when comparing the 40 and Over and 25-39 groups, with one exception—the older group inquired about Finances more often than both younger groups did. Even for the 40 and Over age group, however, Finances ranked only sixth in the most frequent inquiries list. (Figure 2)

Nonstart reasons: summary

Deciding not to enroll often does not mean that a prospective student has decided against returning to school. In our sample, almost one in five prospective students did return to school, but chose to attend a competing university. In addition, a significant number of students (more than 13 percent) planned to return to school, but chose to delay their start term.

Changes in external circumstances frequently affected enrollment plans, and Finances was the fourth-ranked reason for non enrollment—but still below the median.

Suitability—how appropriate the university is for this particular student—was the second most common reason that students did not enroll. Suitability includes factors such as location, course schedule, and delivery format, but almost half of these students were not qualified for the program about which they inquired, and the next largest group never intended to inquire in the first place. (Both of these results were outside the 99 percent error margins of the remaining factors.) This data suggests gaps in the university lead-generation processes. (Figures 3a-3b)

Significant differences in nonstart suitability by gender

More males than females did not intend to inquire, and this result was statistically significant. It is possible that males are more willing than females to fill out online sign-up forms that later are captured in lead-generation programs. →

Figure 1a

INQUIRY REASON	RANK	PERCENT
Referral	1	18.8%
Convenience	2	18.0%
Availability of Program	3	16.9%
Location	4	11.9%
Class format	5	9.1%
Reputation	6	8.7%
Flexible scheduling	7	5.5%
Admissions requirements	8	4.1%
Ease of process	9	1.8%
Finances	10	1.6%

Differences between bands are significant at 99% level n=12,478

Figure 1b

INQUIRY REASON	Female		Male	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Referral	1	21.8%	1	22.3%
Availability of program	2	17.7%	2	16.8%
Location	4	13.9%	4	13.8%
Convenience	3	14.4%	3	11.3%
Reputation	5	8.8%	5	10.4%
Class format	6	8.7%	6	8.4%
Flexible scheduling	7	5.6%	7	5.1%
Admissions requirements	8	2.9%	8	4.4%
Ease of process	9	1.9%	9	2.9%
Academics	10	1.7%	10	1.4%
Finances	11	1.2%	11	2.0%

Highlighted results significant at 0.05 level after Bonferroni for multiple tests n=8,676

INQUIRY REASON	Under 25		25-39		40 and over	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Referral	1	49.7%	1	40.8%	1	37.2%
Availability of program	3	12.0%	2	17.1%	2	17.0%
Location	4	10.9%	3	12.2%	3	14.9%
Reputation	2	14.3%	4	10.8%	5	8.1%
Class format	5	8.0%	5	7.7%	4	8.4%
Admissions requirements	7	1.1%	6	3.6%	7	3.4%
Ease of process	7	1.1%	7	3.4%	7	3.4%
Finances	9	0.6%	9	1.6%	6	5.0%
Flexible scheduling	6	1.7%	8	2.1%	9	1.6%
Customer service	11	0.0%	10	0.7%	10	0.6%

n=1,111

Figure 2

Highlighted results significant at 0.05 level after Bonferroni correction for multiple tests

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Figure 3a

NONSTART REASON	RANK	PERCENT
Competitor	1	18.2%
Suitability	2	17.9%
External	3	17.8%
Finances	4	13.9%
Delayed start term	5	13.4%
Program not offered	6	11.6%
Administrative	7	3.0%
Commitment to degree	8	1.9%
Not interested	9	1.1%
Managing commitments	10	0.9%

Differences between bands are significant at 99% level n=18,088

Figure 3b

NONSTART SUBCATEGORY	RANK	PERCENT
Not qualified	1	48.4%
Did not intend to inquire	2	15.2%
Location	3	11.1%
Course schedule	4	4.9%
Delivery format	5	3.9%
Dissatisfied with service	6	2.4%
Programs offered	7	2.4%

n=3,205

Figure 4

NONSTART SUBCATEGORY	Female		Male	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Not qualified	1	58.6%	1	23.2%
Location	2	11.9%	2	11.4%
Course schedule	3	7.8%	4	5.1%
did not intend to inquire	5	4.6%	3	10.0%
Dissatisfied with service	4	5.1%	6	2.7%
Delivery format	6	3.5%	5	4.6%
Programs offered	7	2.0%	7	2.4%

n=1,712

Interpretation of these specific results is beyond the scope of this study, but could provide an interesting topic for future analysis. (Figure 4)

Significant differences in nonstart suitability by age group

Suitability is the top reason for the Under 25 group and the second-highest reason for adults 40 and Over. However, for the Under 25 group, Suitability is overwhelmingly an issue of qualification; in fact, lack of qualification is the largest nonstart factor for this age group. It is far less important for the 40 and Over group, and this difference is statistically significant at the .05 level.

More young adults than those in the 40 and Over group did not intend to inquire, and this difference is also significant at the .05 level. This data could suggest potential gaps in the recruiting processes, particularly outreach efforts targeting younger students. (Figure 5)

Drop reasons: summary

Almost 30 percent of adult students have difficulty integrating school with their other commitments,

and continuing their education suffers as a result of other commitments. The second most frequent Drop Reason—Finances—accounts for a quarter of the observed attrition. Compared with the relative absence of Finances as a top reason for inquiry or the decision not to enroll, this finding indicates that students do not fully understand the strain that their education will put on their finances. Interestingly, and consistent with much prior research, Academics is not a leading cause of adult student attrition. (Figure 6)

Significant differences in drop reasons by gender

Males were more likely to drop out than females overall, and more often because of problems with managing commitments or effectiveness. However, although the differences were statistically significant, the magnitude of the differences was small.

Females dropped out almost twice as often as males because of health reasons or a lack of support, and this result was statistically significant.

Significant differences and commonalities in drop reasons by age

For all of the top reasons, differences between the Under 25 group and adults 25–39 years old were significant at the .01 level. While Drop Reasons vary by age, Finances is a significant factor for all age groups (although slightly less for the 25–39 age group than either the Under 25 or Over 40 groups).

Students 25 and older are more likely to drop out because of difficulty in managing their commitments, and this issue is most significant for students aged 25–39. In contrast, Personal Effectiveness and Commitment to Graduation are more significant issues for younger students, ➔

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Figure 5

NONSTART REASON	Under 25		25-39		40 and over	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Suitability	1	37.8%	4	18.8%	2	24.3%
Competitor	2	20.6%	2	23.3%	1	25.2%
Finances	4	13.9%	1	25.2%	3	23.4%
External	5	7.8%	2	23.3%	4	18.5%
Program not offered	3	20.0%	5	9.4%	5	8.6%

Highlighted results significant at 0.01 level after Bonferroni correction for multiple tests

NONSTART SUBCATEGORY	Under 25		25-39		40 and over	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Not qualified	1	73.5%	1	66.7%	1	42.6%
Did not intend to inquire	2	19.1%	4	4.4%	6	5.6%
Programs offered	3	2.9%	2	8.7%	2	13.0%
Location	7	0.0%	3	5.8%	3	9.3%

Highlighted results significant at 0.05 level after Bonferroni correction for multiple tests

n=191

DROP REASON	RANK	PERCENT
Managing commitments	1	29.7%
Finances	2	25.9%
Effectiveness	3	13.2%
Commitment to graduation	4	9.3%
Health and support	5	8.6%
School community	6	6.8%
Academic	7	6.5%

n=30,413

Figure 6

99% confidence level between bands

while Health and Support issues are more prevalent among students over 40 years of age. (Figures 7a-7b)

CONCLUSIONS AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study can suggest the need for administrators to review current assumptions about what drives the adult student to enroll in a particular program and what motivates him or her to persist through to graduation. Here are some considerations that have strategic implications relative to these findings.

Review marketing investments, messaging, and program development

This study suggests that referrals play a much more important role in adult students' choice of university than prior research indicated.

Administrators might be under investing in generating and leveraging referrals via methods such as word of mouth and social networking.

Students who inquire but do not enroll at a university might be choosing a competitive school. This data underscores the importance of knowing the competition and consistently reviewing competitive messaging and positioning. →

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Figure 7a

DROP REASON	Female		Male	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Managing commitments	1	27.5%	1	31.3%
Finances	2	26.1%	2	26.3%
Effectiveness	3	12.3%	3	13.7%
Commitment to graduation	5	8.8%	4	9.3%
Health and support	4	11.8%	7	6.2%
School community	6	7.0%	5	6.6%
Academics	7	6.6%	6	6.4%

n=28,469

Figure 7b

DROP REASON	Under 25		25-39		40 and over	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Managing commitments	2	23.0%	1	32.8%	2	30.4%
Finances	1	30.9%	2	28.5%	1	30.9%
Effectiveness	3	12.9%	3	11.1%	4	7.7%
Commitment to graduation	4	12.3%	5	7.8%	5	6.5%
Health and support	7	5.0%	4	8.1%	3	12.3%
School community	5	8.2%	6	6.0%	6	6.3%
Academic	6	7.7%	7	5.9%	7	6.0%

n=28,469

Managing Commitments and Finances results with 40 and over group are significant at the 0.05 level; all other highlighted results are significant at 0.01 level after Bonferroni correction for multiple tests

Investigate strategies that address demographic differences

External factors—Finances and Managing Commitments—are the top two reasons for non-starts and early dropouts. Offering resources that enable students to navigate these challenges can have an impact on enrollment and retention rates.

Likewise, resources that address demographic differences in Drop Reasons—Effectiveness, Health and Support, and Managing Commitments—can improve graduation rates and overall student success.

ABOUT INSIDETRACK

InsideTrack is the nation's premier provider of student coaching services. Our mission is to improve student engagement, persistence, and success. InsideTrack has coached more than 250,000 students at more than 50 campuses nationally. Our clients include Northeastern

University, the University of Dayton, DeVry University, and Florida State University. To learn more about InsideTrack, please visit: www.insidetrack.com.

In controlled studies with more than a quarter of a million students, InsideTrack Coaching has proven to increase enrollment by 17.3 percent and retention rates by 14 percent, while improving student satisfaction across seven domains measuring the quality of student life. For information on these studies, please contact programs@insidetrack.com or call us at 415.243.4440.

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