



**ROSS GROUP
TRAINING**



Adult Learners Fit Into Four Distinct Categories



**GLOBAL
TRAINING &
DEVELOPMENT**



Adult Learners Fit Into Four Distinct Categories

The phrase “college student” usually conjures up images of young, scruffy, fun-loving, slightly intoxicated, “Animal House” types throwing the Frisbee around the quad. However, these “traditional” 18- to 22-year-old full-time undergraduate students residing on campus only represent 16 percent of the higher education population in the United States, or fewer than 3 million of the more than 17 million currently enrolled students. Instead, the vast majority of students are adult learners. And according to Eduventures, a research and consulting firm serving the education market, these adults can be categorized into four main groups: career advancers, career changers, enrichment seekers and regulatory compliers.

In its report “Assessing Consumer Demand for Adult Continuing and Professional Education,” Eduventures identified four key consumer groups that dominate the adult continuing and professional education market. Each group has distinct motivators, program preferences and purchasing behavior, and understanding those factors will be increasingly critical to those developing continuing and professional education programs and marketing strategies.

According to the reporter, career advancers primarily are enrolled in or interested in master’s degree programs. These consumers view a graduate degree as a ticket to career advancement, tend to choose doctoral degrees at a higher rate and place greater importance on a convenient location near work and the availability of online courses.

Career changers are slightly more likely to be interested in bachelor’s degrees, associate degrees and post-baccalaureate certificates, which are all often entry-level credentials for new careers. This group tends to place greater importance on a program’s specialized/professional accreditation, career services and affiliation with a professional organization.

Enrichment seekers represent the strongest audience for individual courses, both non-credit and for-credit, unaffiliated with a degree program. A large number of enrichment seekers are primarily enrolled in or interested in master’s and bachelor’s degree programs, but at a lower rate than the other groups. Enrichment seekers place the greatest importance on smaller class sizes.





**Adult
Learners
Fit
Into
Four
Distinct
Categories**

Regulatory compliers tend to be more interested in certificate programs and for-credit courses than other types of consumers. They indicate a strong preference for continuing education units (CEUs) and professional development hours, which might not fall cleanly into the categories of a standard credential or course. This group is considerably less concerned about other criteria such as class size or student services, as well as cost or quality issues.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents cited career-related motivations as their primary motivation for pursuing continuing education. Most of these consumers are primarily interested in education to advance their careers, with 20 percent seeking to improve performance in their current jobs, 18 percent anticipating career changes and 11 percent preparing for new jobs in their current fields. An additional 16 percent are primarily motivated by mandated continuing education (i.e., required licensing, certification or CEUs) in their fields.

In their decisions about courses and programs among students and potential students surveyed, all ranked the attributes of quality, faculty competence, convenience and reputation at or near the top. These students and potential students also responded to advertising terms that reflected their primary priorities, including such phrases as “quality,” “flexible scheduling,” “academic excellence” and “affordable.”

According to the survey, course catalogs were rated as the most important information source, followed by a collection of online information sources (e.g., school Web sites, Web directories, search engines, e-mail) and referral-based sources (e.g., family and friends, co-workers).

