

Re-Enrolling Adult Learners

A Community ✓ College Checklist



COMMUNITY COLLEGES have always served adults balancing work, family, and education, making them a natural fit for nontraditional students. Yet within this group is a distinct and often overlooked segment: adults with some college, no credential (SCNC). As the number of traditional age students continues to decline, SCNC learners represent a viable enrollment opportunity. But re-engaging them requires dedicated, tailored efforts that reflect their unique circumstances and challenges.

This checklist is designed to help you evaluate and strengthen your approach to re-enrollment. Use it to identify specific actions your team can take, find opportunities to better serve SCNC learners, and align your re-enrollment strategy with their needs.

1 Audit your data and language

Before you launch a campaign, ensure you understand who you are trying to reach and how you are talking about them.

Enrich your contact data. If a learner stopped out three years ago, their phone number or home address has likely changed. Update the contact information for your stopout list to ensure your messages reach your learners.

Segment your SCNC list. Avoid treating these learners as generic "leads." Separate them from your general transfer or new learner lists so you can track their specific outcomes.

Review your terminology. Scan your website, emails, and internal documents for deficit-based language like "dropout" or "probation." Replace these terms with empowering language like "returning learner" or "adult learner."

Prioritize personalized outreach. Go beyond list segmentation and identify which learners will benefit from personalized messaging about local job markets, flexible scheduling, or industry-specific training programs. Tailor your outreach to demonstrate an understanding of their work, family, and community commitments.

Identify "near-completers." Prioritize outreach to learners who have earned 45 or more credits. These learners are often the most motivated to return because they can see the finish line.

2 Simplify the path back

Adult learners are often squeezing administrative tasks into 15-minute breaks during their workday. Remove barriers that stop them before they even start.

Secret shop your re-enrollment process. Attempt to re-enroll as a learner would. Note every point of friction on an internal checklist and create a plan to fix them. Your checklist should include questions like:

- *Are forms easy to find and complete?*
- *Are there any broken links or unclear instructions?*
- *Is there an option for online or remote assistance?*
- *Is the language welcoming and inclusive for adult learners?*
- *How long does it take a learner to complete the full re-enrollment process?*

Promote flexible scheduling options. Ensure your college offers a range of course formats, such as evening, weekend, online, or eight-week terms, to fit working adults' schedules. Highlight these options wherever learners interact with your website or advisors.

Address financial barriers directly. Publicize available emergency aid, debt forgiveness, small-dollar grants, and payment plan options as part of your re-enrollment communications. Make sure learners know how to access these resources early in the process.

Translate internal acronyms. Review your learner-facing materials. Change program names to clear, benefit-driven descriptions (e.g., "Learner Success Support") so learners know exactly what help is available.

Create a "one-stop" digital resource. Build a dedicated landing page for returning learners that houses all necessary links—application, financial aid, and advising booking—in one place, eliminating the need to hunt through your main website.

Offer flexible appointment times. Ensure that at least some advising and financial aid appointments are available during evenings or lunch hours to accommodate working schedules.

3 Adjust your support structure

Getting them back is only half the battle. You need to support them so they stay.

Assign a dedicated point of contact. Ensure each returning adult learner is matched with an experienced advisor or navigator who will support them from the moment they re-enroll through graduation.

Audit your course schedule. Review whether you offer enough sections of required core courses in flexible formats, including eight-week terms, evenings, weekends, or fully online.

Review financial barriers and incentives. Investigate your policy on small institutional debts. Can you forgive parking fines or library fees that act as registration holds? Even small grants to cover these costs can yield a high return on investment.



4 Personalize your outreach

Generic mass emails rarely work for this population. Your outreach needs to build trust and show you see them as individuals.

Draft "value-first" messaging. Write outreach scripts that acknowledge their previous hard work and highlight specific benefits of returning, such as career advancement, flexible scheduling, or new career pathways connected to local employers. For example, an outreach might say:

"Hi [Learner Name], I'm calling from [Institution Name]. I'm reaching out because I saw you were making great progress toward your [Major] degree before you had to pause. You were only [X] credits away from finishing. We've since launched a [new flexible program, scholarship, etc.] that I think could be a great fit for your schedule. Would you be open to a quick chat about what it would take to finish the degree you worked so hard for?"

Emphasize local workforce connections. Track which adult learners have previously enrolled in career and technical education or workforce-related pathways. Consider how your outreach and messaging can highlight relevant partnerships with local employers, job fairs, or work-based learning opportunities that directly connect their return to improved career outcomes.

Connect learners to dedicated advising. Ensure all communications make it clear that returning adult learners will have access to a dedicated advisor or navigator, someone who specializes in supporting adults from re-enrollment through graduation, and who understands the challenges of balancing education with work and family.

Use a multi-channel approach. Don't rely on email alone. Plan a sequence that includes text messages and phone calls. A text message is often the most effective way to cut through the noise.

Extend your "welcome wagon." If you send personalized welcome videos or care packages to new first-year students, send them to returning adult learners too. Small gestures signal belonging.

Automate nudges. Set up automated reminders for key deadlines (like the FAFSA or registration) to keep learners on track without requiring manual follow-up from your team every time. For example:

"Don't forget! The deadline to register for spring classes is [date]. We're here to help if you have any questions—reach out anytime!"



5 Measure what matters

Move beyond general enrollment numbers to understand the specific behavior of your adult learners.

Track persistence rates separately. Monitor how your re-enrolled adult learners persist from term to term compared to first-time students.

Analyze credit loads taken by returning learners. Review the average credit loads for this group and compare results with other learner populations. This data can help your institution adapt course offerings, advising, and financial aid to better meet adult learners' needs.

Survey your returners. After their first term back, send a short survey asking what one thing made it easy to return and what one thing was hardest. Use this feedback to continuously refine your process.

Here's an example of what the survey could look like:

- **What made it easy for you to return to [Community College Name]?**
(Open-ended question to identify positive aspects of the re-enrollment process.)
- **What was the most challenging part of re-enrolling?**
(Open-ended question to uncover barriers or pain points in the process.)
- **What additional support or resources would have made your return easier?**
(Open-ended question to gather actionable feedback for improving support systems.)