



STRATEGY IN ACTION

Reimagining Orientation for Returning and Adult Learners



REIMAGINING ORIENTATION BEGINS WITH welcoming nontraditional learners, identifying opportunities for engagement, and ensuring orientation and events serve this specific audience. In this guide, you'll find strategies and best practices for colleges and universities seeking to create a smooth onboarding experience for non-traditional learners.

Drawing on examples from our partners, it outlines practical ways to welcome and orient adult learners ranging from specialized resources and mentorship programs to tailored orientation modules. By thoughtfully addressing the needs of this growing population, institutions can foster a sense of belonging and set adult learners up for academic and personal success. Use these recommendations to re-think your orientation through an adult learner lens and identify opportunities to support your adult learners.

Highlighting Learner Success

Incorporating learner testimonials in your orientation materials and communications can be a powerful way to connect with your prospective adult learners. Testimonials highlight authentic experiences, provide practical information, and help learners see themselves as successful learners and graduates.

When featuring learner stories, be sure to:

- **Select a variety of nontraditional students and backgrounds to share their tips and resources:** working parents, veterans, career switchers, etc. Be sure that returning and adult learners can see themselves reflected.
- **Capture real perspectives:** fears, obstacles, and how they overcame them. The more authentic, the more potential to build trust.
- **Include key specifics:** how long they've been out of school, family/work commitments, reasons for leaving and returning, and strategies used to succeed. Details help learners relate.
- **Showcase diverse paths:** whether they've returned for new careers or setting an example for their kids, focus on different motivations and accomplishments that can inspire.

Examples

UNC Charlotte

- [Success Stories](#)
- [Student Tips and Resources](#)
- [Adult Student Survival Guide](#)

University of Akron

- [\[Video\] Nontraditional student dives into college life](#)
- [Adult Focus Checklist](#)

Kalamazoo Valley Community College

- [Brochure](#) with Testimonial and Checklist



Additional Resources

When creating additional resources specifically geared towards returning and adult learners, the most impactful assistance tends to fall into a few key categories.

Institutions can best serve these learners by prioritizing:

- Flexible academic programming such as completely online, hybrid, and/or accelerated courses
- Dedicated financial aid including grants, scholarships, and payment plans
- Generous transfer credit policies to speed up time to degree completion
- Student services such as transportation, childcare, and access to technology

While institutions can capture initial interest among adult learners with academic, financial, and credit options, providing additional support services play a key role in an adult learner's decision to re-enroll.

Consider connecting adult learners with peer mentors, who can share their experiences with them and help them connect with the larger college community. Regularly and clearly communicating the availability of resources to adult learners can help them feel seen and valued. Running year-round email and social media campaigns highlighting the resources, encouraging faculty to promote them in their classes, and including them in student portals and returning student materials can reassure adult learners that they are seen and valued.

Examples

Camden County College

- The [Back on Track to Degree](#) offers comprehensive services including credit for prior learning, technology rental, debt forgiveness, textbook assistance, and child care

University of Akron

- [Adult Focus](#) provides online programs, pre-admission advising, adult-oriented services, and an online orientation
- [Resources for Adult Students](#) include counseling and testing, child care, campus shuttle, and tutoring

William Paterson

- [Center for Degree Completion and Adult Learning](#) focuses on awarding academic credit for prior experience
- [WP Online Student Success](#) offers online learning support, tips for success, and tutoring.

Gateway Technical College

- [Jump Start Workshops](#) teach navigation of online tools and peer advisors give returning learners tips on having a successful experience in their journey back to school

UNC Charlotte

- The [Adult Student Ambassador Program](#) fosters a sense of belonging, networking, and leadership opportunities
- [49er Finish Program](#) dedicates advisors to assist returning learners in degree completion



EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIES IN ACTION

Events and Orientation

Tailoring your events and orientation strategy for adult learners can foster community and ease the transition back to college life.

Effective events for returners often share these key features:

- Occur early and frequently—initial outreach makes a strong impression
- Offer both in-person and virtual options to drive access and engagement
- Provide dedicated space for affinity groups, like non-traditional students, to interact
- Incorporate informal social activities to build connections
- Include alumni panels for motivational stories from graduates
- Cover topics to validate their challenges such as balancing school, work, and family responsibilities
- Highlight campus support and resources available to promote success

By bringing returning learners together to meet peers, hear from fellow adult learners, and understand how the institution can support their unique needs, targeted events create a welcoming environment right from the start.

Examples

Montclair State University

- The [Adult Academic Success Seminar](#), designed to ease a student's transition into college, is a required two-credit course that satisfies a general education requirement.

UNC Charlotte

- UNC Charlotte provides in-person and virtual [events for adults and non-traditional students](#)

Eastern Michigan University

- EMU created a [specialized online orientation](#) where learners can focus on the customized modules that are most helpful to them. Most popular modules: “How to Navigate Online Systems and Courses in Canvas” and “Time Management”

Returning and Adult Learner Preparedness

To ensure that returning and adult learners have all the information, resources, and support that they need to feel confident on day one, ask your team the following questions:

- Do returning and adult learners have staff contact information and know who to ask if they have any questions?
- Do they know where to access academic support resources, as well as career, health, and basic needs assistance?
- Do they understand class participation expectations and behavior (online and in-person) and general community standards?
- Do they know where to access tech tutorials, and are they familiar with relevant learning management platforms?
- Are they familiar with academic policies and procedures critical to their success, such as registration times and add/drop dates that carry academic and financial implications?
- Do they understand the importance of reviewing syllabi, obtaining required class materials, and proactively connecting with faculty throughout their student experience?
- Are they familiar with the institution's experiential learning opportunities, community and employer engagement, and alumni networking?

Personalizing with Purpose

Supporting adult learners requires rethinking traditional orientation approaches. By tailoring outreach to address common barriers faced by this unique population, institutions can smooth the transition back to the classroom. Small touches like resource checklists for adult learners, testimonials from non-traditional graduates, and dedicated social events make a big difference in setting adult learners up for success.

At its core, effective orientation for adult learners is about understanding — and validating — their unique needs. Consider offering flexible orientation options, both in-person and virtual, so that no one feels left behind. In addition, be sure that support services speak to these learners' circumstances, showcasing paths to overcome hurdles.

Rather than sharing generic information, personalize with targeted resources and community connections. When returners feel recognized and empowered, they gain the confidence to persist. And by intentionally welcoming back and re-orienting adult learners, institutions can help unlock their potential to cross the finish line and transform their lives.

