



UTAH SYSTEM OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

ISSUE BRIEF

August 2021

Brett Campbell

Adult Learners in Utah

Nationwide, adult learners currently make up between 25% and 40% of all college-attending students,¹ including military veterans, single mothers, and underemployed workers. Many of these students identify as African American or Latinx, and almost two-thirds (62.5%) attend college part-time.

Historically, adult learners have been identified as any degree-seeking student enrolled in college aged 25 and older. This focus on degree-seeking students ignores a substantial percentage of community and technical colleges with large student populations of adult learners.² Here, we expanded this definition to include both degree- and certificate-seeking students aged 25 and older.

Prior research indicates that adults enroll or re-enroll in postsecondary education to improve their socioeconomic circumstances. Motivations reported by adult learners include seeking a career change, advancing in their current career, needing to update their skills, or experiencing a life transition.³ Adult learners face multiple competing demands when working to obtain higher education credentials, such as balancing work with course attendance. Additionally, adult students are often married or divorced, and many have children at home.

Enrollment

Adult learners make up approximately 29.9% of Utah's postsecondary students. The median age of Utah's adult learners at enrollment is 33.8. Of these, 70.9% of adult learners are between 25 and 34 years old. Most enrollment growth occurs among adult learners between the ages of 35 and 44. This age group made up 21.5% of Utah postsecondary enrollments in 2020 compared to 16.6% in 2011.

-
- ¹ Blumenstyk, Goldie. 2018. *The Adult Student: The Population Colleges -- and the Nation -- Can't Afford to Ignore*. Washington, DC: The Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Snyder, T. D., de Brey, C., & Dillow, S. A. (2018). Digest of educational statistics 2016 (NCES 2017-094). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017094.pdf>.
- NCES. 2019. "Digest of Education Statistics 2019." *National Center for Education Statistics*. Accessed Jan. 11, 2021. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/2019menu_tables.asp.
- ² Metzner, John P. Bean and Barbara S. 1985. "A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition." *Review of Educational Research* 485-540.
- ³ Aslanian, Carol B. 2017. "Post-Traditional College Students: Attracting and Serving the New Majority." *EducationDynamics*. May 1. Accessed Jan. 11, 2021. <http://educationdynamics.com/post-traditional-college-students-webinar/>.

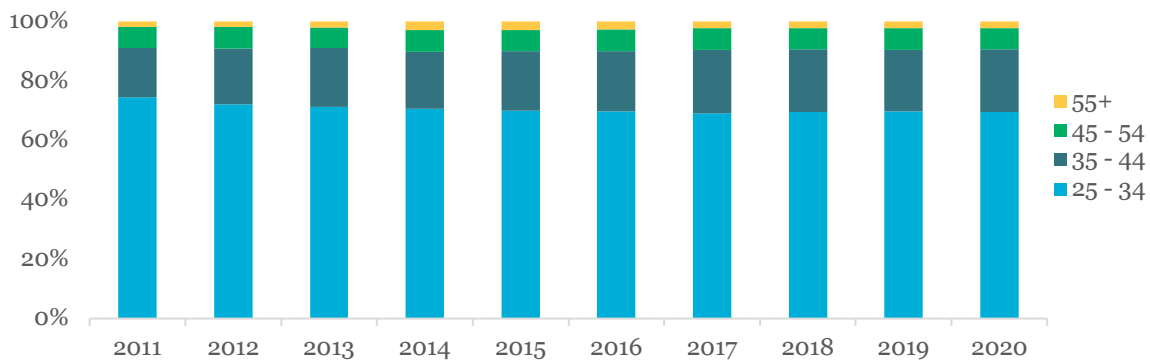


Figure 1. Enrollment Trend by Age Group

Unlike traditional students, most adult learners are male (53.2%). Between the ages of 25 and 34, most adult learners are male (39.4%). However, for students aged 35 and older, the majority reverts to higher enrollment among women.

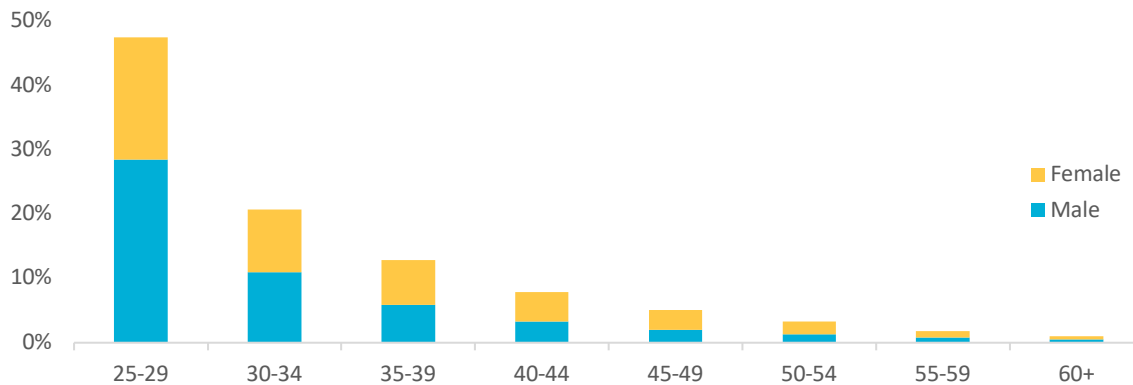


Figure 2. Enrollment Age by Gender

After White students, Latinx students have the largest representation, followed by Asian and African American students. African American and Native American students are better represented among adult learners compared to traditional students.

Table 1. Race/Ethnicity Enrollment Breakdown by Student

	Adult Learners	Traditional Students
Asian American	2.3%	2.3%
African American/Black	2.1%	1.7%
Latinx/Hispanic	10.3%	11.8%
Native American/Alaskan Native	1.7%	1.2%
Pacific Islander	1.2%	1.1%
Two or More Races	1.4%	1.2%
White	81.1%	79.6%

Instructional Programs

Adult learners have reported that they seek better opportunities through higher education,⁴ and they see that college can get them into high-demand occupations. These students enroll in programs needed in Utah's economy. The ten most popular instructional programs for adult learners are:

- Health professions and related programs
- Liberal arts, general studies, and humanities
- Business, management, marketing, and related support services
- Computer and information sciences and support services
- Education
- Engineering
- Psychology
- Visual & performing arts
- Public administration and social service professions
- Biology and biomedical sciences

These fields of study have remained relatively consistent in their ranking over the last decade. However, the health professions, education, and computer/information sciences enrollments have declined.

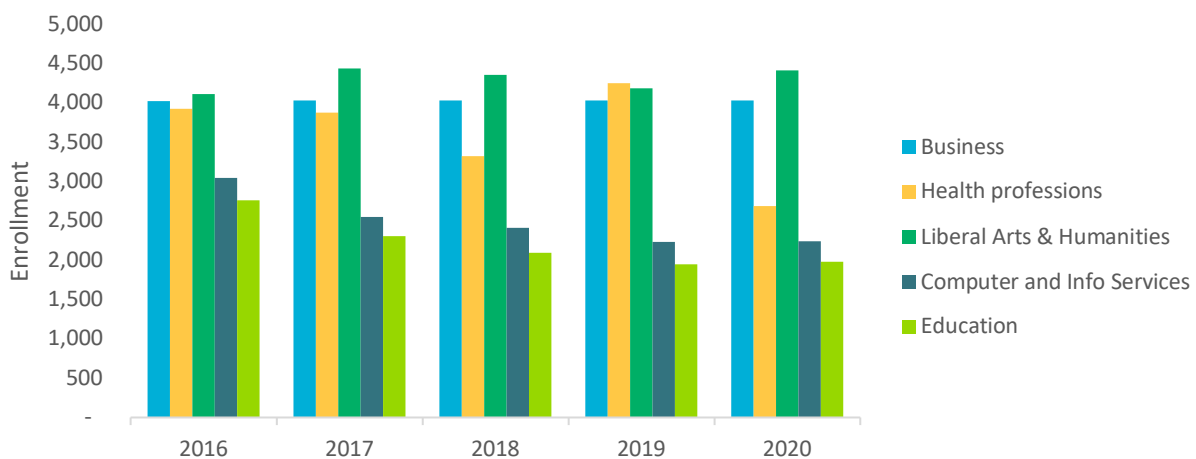


Figure 3. Top Five Instructional Programs Enrolled by Adult Learners for the Past Five Years

At Utah degree-granting institutions, which award associate and bachelor's degrees or higher, the enrollment trend for adult learners' instructional programs match the redistribution of the whole student population, except for in education and computer and information services programs. The majority of adult learner enrollments for liberal arts and humanities are in associate degree programs. Over time,

⁴ Aslanian, Carol B. 2017. "Post-Traditional College Students: Attracting and Serving the New Majority." *EducationDynamics*. May 1. Accessed Jan 11, 2021. <http://educationdynamics.com/post-traditional-college-students-webinar/>.

adult learner enrollment in the health professions has increased, and enrollment in business programs has declined.

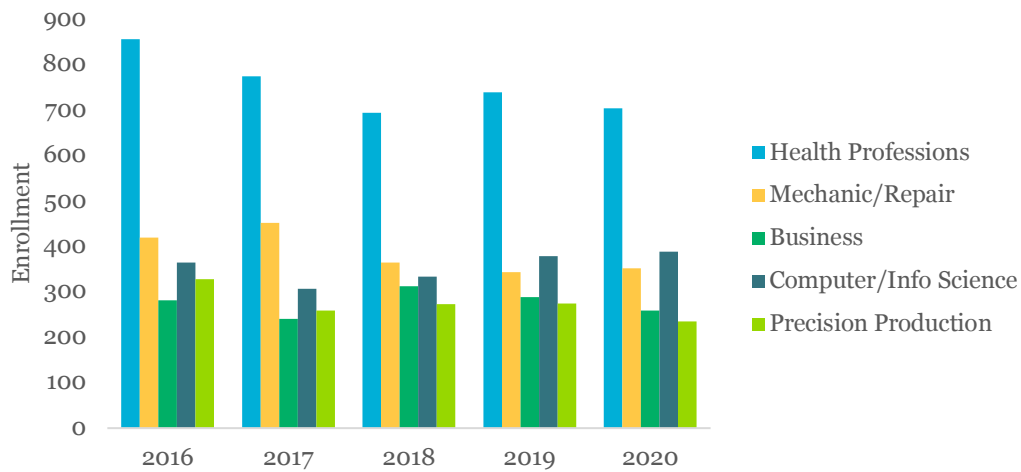


Figure 4. Top Five Enrolled Programs at Utah Technical Colleges

Adult learners at technical colleges parallel the overall enrollment rates in health professions, business, and computer and information sciences. While many technical college instructional programs overlap with degree-granting institutions, technical colleges do provide access to distinct programs. These particular technical programs are evident in the top enrolling programs. Some of those top enrolling programs include mechanic and repair services and precision production.

Distance Education

Distance education can save students time by providing access to courses remotely, and in many instances, within their schedule. These courses can ease the educational burden of adult learners. Findings show that adult learners were slightly more likely to earn credit through distance education than traditional students. Over the ten years examined, thirty percent of traditional students earn credit in distance education courses compared to adult learners at 37.4%. Relatedly, adult learners earned slightly more credit hours (17.1) through distance education courses than traditional students (15.3). Of course, the average number of credit hours will directly correlate to program length. Adult learners earned 9.8 credits through distance education for one-year programs, 13.7 credit hours for two-year programs, and 16.3 for four-year programs.

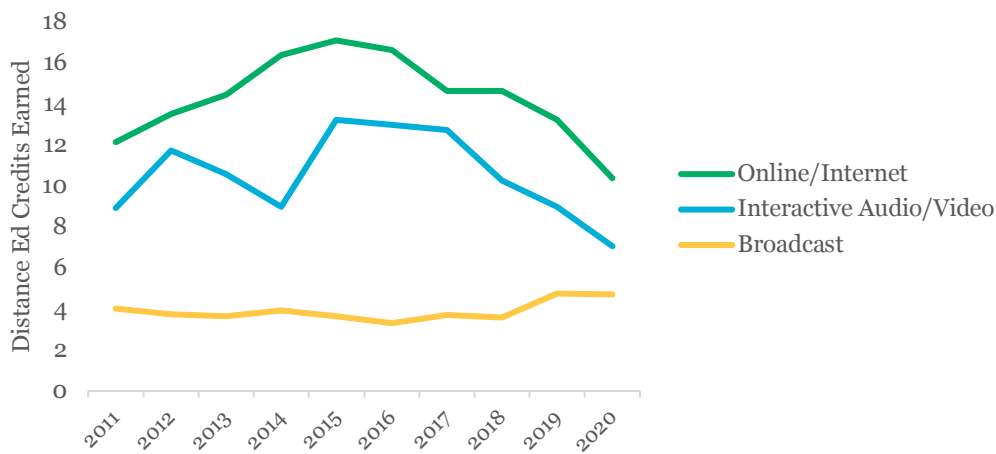


Figure 5. Average Distance Education Courses Adult Learners Earn by Year

Adult learners initially favored distance education with increasing credit hours earned between 2011 and 2015; however, fewer adult learners have completed their distance education courses over the past five years.

Prior Credit

Adult learners transfer more credits into their academic program than traditional students. Most of Utah’s adult learners (83.0%) have prior higher education experience. Also, adult learners earn more developmental credit hours than traditional students. Traditional students bring more prior credits toward their graduation goals than adult learners. Credit from prior learning applied to college transcripts includes Concurrent Enrollment, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement courses CLEP exams, military service, and more.

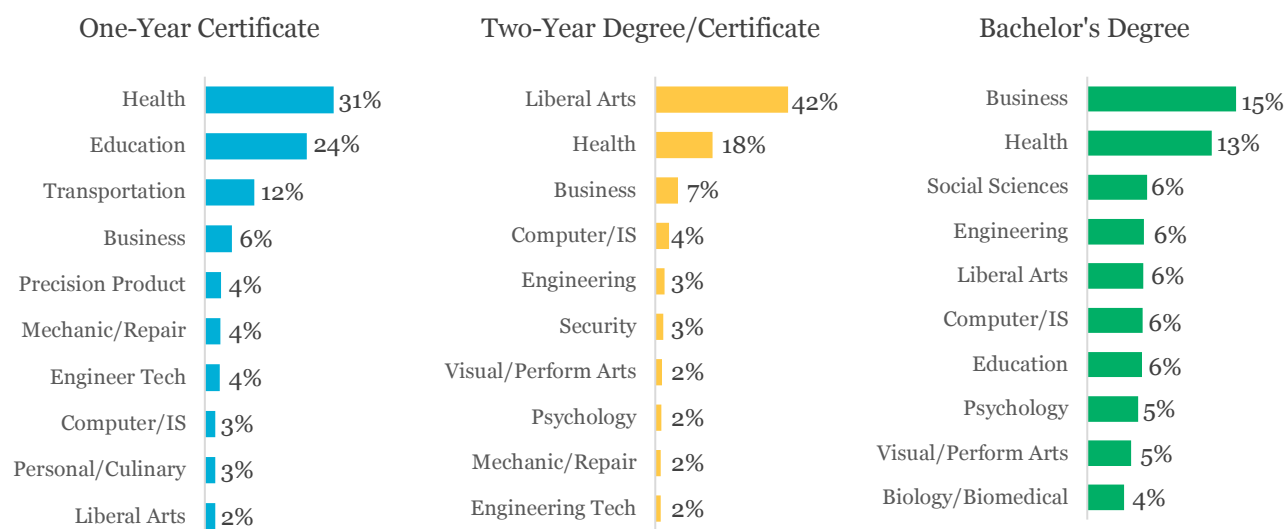


Figure 8. Top 10 Credentials Earned by CIP Family and Award

Graduation

Findings show adult learners take longer to complete a certificate or degree compared to traditional students. Based on data from USHE degree-granting institutions, 33.3% of adult learners earn their intended award within six years. By comparison, 41.2% of traditional students earn their intended award within six years.

Most of the awards earned by adult learners were either a bachelor's (61.8%) or associate degrees (30.7%). All certificates make up the remaining 7.5% of awards earned.

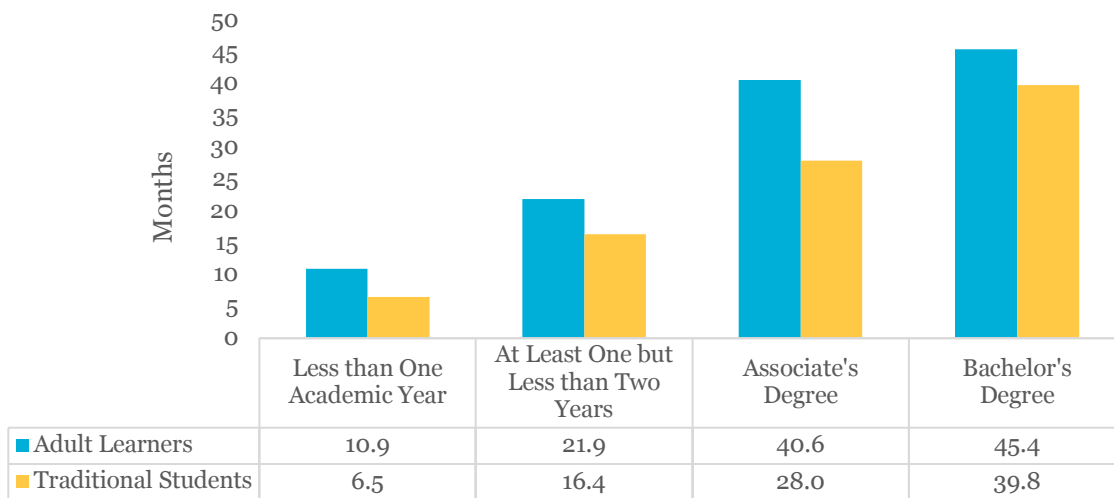


Figure 6. Time to Earn Degree by Award Level

Consistent over the past ten years, three-fourths (73.5%) of adult graduates are between 25 and 34 years old, with 53.9% between the ages of 25 and 29. Younger-aged adult learners earn the greatest number of each award type, with most earning bachelor’s degrees (Figure 7). Adult learners between 35 and 44 also predominantly obtain bachelor’s degrees, while the majority of adult learners 45 years and older earn certificates that take less than one year to complete.

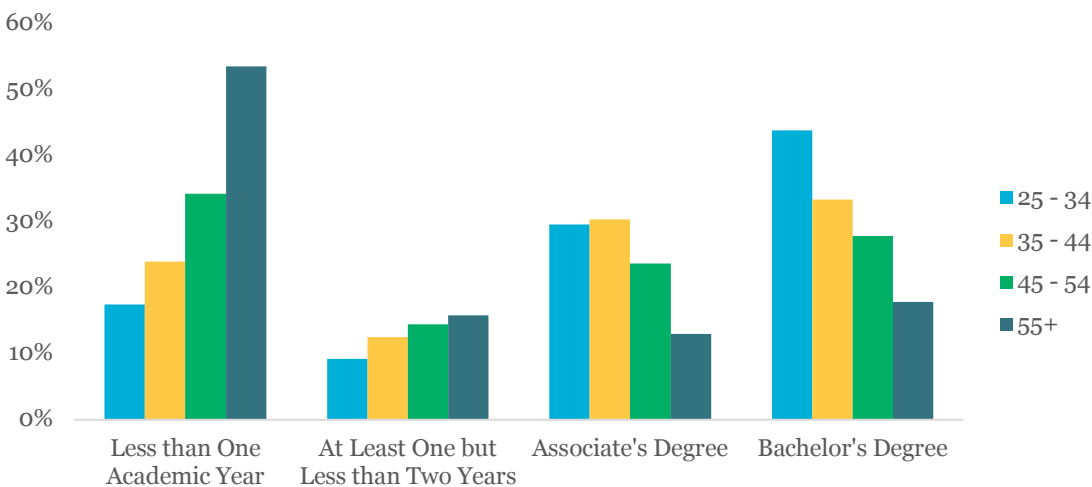


Figure 7. Adult Learner Award Completion by Ten-Year Age Band. Each age band totals 100%.

Adult learners have a higher percentage of White graduates than traditional students (Table 2). In contrast, traditional students have a higher representation of Asian and multi-racial graduates. Most adult graduates identify as male (57.5%), compared to 36.2% of traditional graduates.

Table 2. Race/Ethnicity Graduation Breakdown by Student

	Adult Learner	Traditional Student
Asian American	2.0%	2.6%
African American/Black	1.2%	1.1%
Latinx/Hispanic	7.3%	7.5%
Native American/Alaskan Native	0.9%	0.7%
Pacific Islander	0.6%	0.5%
Two or More Races	2.1%	3.3%
White	79.9%	77.1%

Implications

Adult learners make up a significant segment of higher education student populations. Of those, most attend part-time, probably to fulfill other responsibilities such as work or family. Currently, 82.1% of adult learners have some previous higher education experience. As a whole, adult learners are interested in health professions, business, and engineering, but a substantial number enroll in liberal arts or general studies associate degree programs.

Adult learners are more likely to earn credit hours in distance education classes than traditional students; however, these only total six credit hours out of all received. We lack research in knowing if distance education course work is restricted to a number of distance education course offerings; available resources, such as internet access or digital training; or other reasons.

In the ten years examined, one in three adult learners earned their intended award. Most adult graduates are under 35 years old. Adult learners take about one year longer on average than traditional students to complete their program. Frequently, these students are funneled into developmental courses.

The academic supports adult learners need differs significantly from traditional students. Further, needs vary from one institution to another. How state systems can best support adult learners is not well-documented but could be identified through further research. Strategies to address adult learner support may be developed through continued investigation.