

# Plus 50 Students: Tapping Into a Growing Market



There's a new potential community college student on the block—and it's not the customary 18-year-old. In years past, this student might have been called “elderly” or “senior” and enrolled solely in enrichment courses to enliven retirement. But this new generation of students—many of them baby boomers who came of age in the Vietnam War era—rejects any label that smacks of being “old.” In fact, they can expect another 20 to 30 years of demanding, high-quality life and full engagement in their communities. Worried about a turbulent economy, many of them are eager to jump-start a stalled career or retrain for a new job.

At 78 million strong, the baby boomer generation is bringing a surge of older students to campus. In a national survey by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 93% of the institutions reported demand for plus 50 programs and services. Community college is particularly appealing to this student population: half of all adults over age 50 who are pursuing higher education are choosing to enroll at community colleges, according to the American Council on Education. The number of adults over age 40 attending community college has doubled in the last

decade, and these numbers are only going to increase.

Many observers see the arrival of plus 50 students as the beginning of a new chapter in the community college movement, as education becomes more widely available to a broader range of students. “Reaching out to plus 50 students fulfills the long-standing community college mission to take education into the community,” said Dr. George R. Boggs, AACC’s president and CEO. “This new brand of student is going to revolutionize and reenergize community college campuses.”

To help community colleges meet student demands, AACC launched its Plus 50 Initiative in 2008, supported with a grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies. Interest among community colleges was so high that more than 60 colleges applied to be part of the project. AACC is currently working with 15 community colleges to develop model Plus 50 programs and benchmark best practices.

The help couldn’t come soon enough. Is your campus ready for the plus 50 student? Find out why plus 50 students are drawn to community colleges, what benefits they can bring, and how community colleges are transforming to meet their needs.

## I. Factors Drawing Plus 50 Students to Community College

When attracting and recruiting baby boomers, community colleges have clear advantages over four-year institutions. The hallmarks of community colleges are flexibility, convenience, and affordability—all features that appeal to plus 50 students.

**Tailored community college programs meet the needs of today’s plus 50 students who want to stay on the job.** The stereotype of “senior” students with time on their hands for enrichment courses is being jettisoned by today’s plus 50 students at community colleges nationwide. While some plus 50 students enjoy enrichment coursework, many are highly focused on acquiring skills that will get them back on the job or improve their careers. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that between 2006 and 2016, the number of workers ages 55-64 will rise by 36.5%, and the number of workers ages 65-74 and 75 and older will increase by more than 80%.

With little patience for long-term degree programs, plus 50 students are increasingly turning to community colleges for quick job skill refreshers and career tune-ups. They're serious about applying their newfound skills. Four out of five students over the age of 40 surveyed in 2007 by Portland Community College were taking classes not for personal enrichment, but to improve their skills and marketability in the workplace.

**Credit for workplace experience:** For plus 50 students who are single-mindedly focused on getting back to work and moving ahead with their careers, earning college credit for their workplace experience is an added boost. The acceptance of their work experience for course credit helps students get a head start on their program.

**Condensed, flexible, and convenient course offerings:** A promising practice emerging from the Plus 50 Initiative colleges is offering short-term and condensed classes. Short-term classes enable schedule-stretched baby boomers to keep working at full-time jobs and juggling family obligations while taking courses. With this population, convenient course scheduling is king. A survey of adult learners by Eduventures found that having "the most convenient schedule" was the number one reason cited for enrolling. The survey researchers discovered great interest among adult learners in courses and programs delivered in an accelerated summer session, or in a 100% online or hybrid format, with half of the adult learners reporting that they are likely to consider these formats.

**Location, location, location:** The baby boomer preference for convenience extends beyond course scheduling to meeting locations that reduce travel time. In addition, as transportation to campus becomes a concern for older students with diminishing eyesight and mobility, there will be more demand for classes off site, parking accommodations on campus, and public transportation to campus.

In a research study in 2006, Palazesi and Bower found that 62% of those surveyed preferred to attend seminars or workshops in the community, rather than going to an on-campus class session. While this approach might pose logistical challenges, community colleges that hold classes elsewhere free up crowded campus classroom space while taking higher education directly into the community.

## II. Plus 50 Benefits to Your Community College

**Your campus diversity and mentoring programs can benefit from plus 50 students.** Many leaders in the community college movement see great promise in reaching out to plus 50 students. "This is a rare opportunity to attract a brand new demographic to community colleges. That doesn't happen often in the community college world," said Dr. Eugene Giovanni, president of GateWay Community College in Arizona.

With career, civic, and life experiences, plus 50 students bring valuable contributions to the classroom that enrich the learning environment. Their mentoring relationships with younger students foster multigenerational collaboration. In some colleges, these relationships help plus 50 students gain technology skills while preparing younger students to function in the multigenerational workplace they will encounter after completing their studies. Mentoring opportunities become a marketing bonus your college can offer younger students and assure potential plus 50 students that their experience is appreciated and valued.

### Being a Plus 50-Friendly Community College: The Top Ten Things You Can Do

1. Conduct a needs assessment of the local plus 50 population.
2. Tailor admission requirements and financial aid programs to plus 50 adults.
3. Provide a dedicated, point-of-contact faculty member for plus 50 students.
4. Avoid using words like "senior," "old," and "elder."
5. Prepare counselors to deal with plus 50 student needs.
6. Offer short-term courses in condensed blocks of time.
7. Coach faculty about teaching plus 50 learners; adapt classrooms to adult learning styles.
8. Develop a targeted marketing plan, including specialized publications and websites.
9. Partner with organizations that serve and reach out to plus 50 adults.
10. Cultivate support from the CEO and across academic divisions.

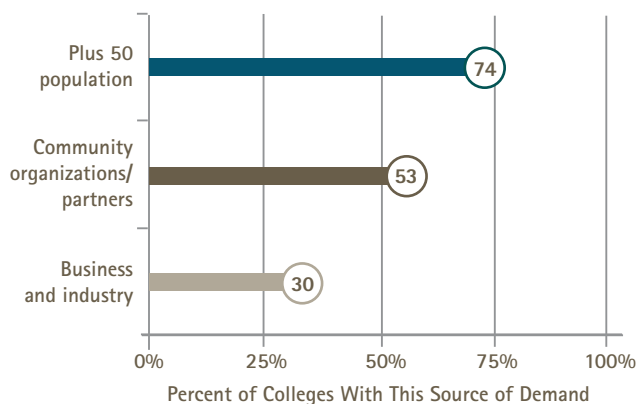
### Plus 50 students can open up financial and volunteer sources for your community college.

Accustomed to the high fees charged in the corporate world for professional development training, many plus 50 students find community college tuition to be a bargain. Because many plus 50 students are not pursuing a traditional degree path, they will take non-credit courses that are not supplemented with state funds. Consequently, many colleges find they can charge tuition and fees that the local market of plus 50 students can bear. With the number of incoming high school seniors projected to gradually decline through 2014, the baby boomer generation offers a significant supply of potential students who have the ability to pay for academic services.

Dollars are not the only resource plus 50 students can bring to campus. Many of them also volunteer on campus, bringing significant benefit to the college. Some campuses report that after enjoying course offerings, plus 50 students are donating funds to the community college foundation and in some cases even endowing student scholarships.

**Companies in your community value community college programs focused on training plus 50 workers.** In AACC's Plus 50 Initiative National Survey, 53% of responding colleges reported that community organizations and partners were requesting more plus 50 programs, and 30% said that demand came from business and industry (see exhibit A).

**A: Sources of Demand for Plus 50 Programming** (n=168)



As employers seek specific skills among their employees and scramble to keep their businesses financially viable

in a rocky economy, they are turning to community colleges. They're seeking the assurance that workers are well trained and productive. Employers value the hard work ethic and experience that plus 50 adults bring to the workplace, knowing that they are more likely to stay on task and produce a quality product. Partnering with a community college to ensure a steady supply of skilled workers makes good business sense.

## III. Transforming the Community College for Plus 50 Students

To successfully recruit and retain plus 50 students, community colleges must be willing to identify and address obstacles that these students face in pursuing continuing education. From fear of having to self-consciously stand in line with 19-year-olds at the student advising office, to anxiety over how they'll download their online homework, this population's concerns must be resolved. Programs and procedures that consider their needs can ease the transition to campus for plus 50 students.

**Conduct a needs assessment.** Convene a focus group or conduct a needs assessment and/or survey of potential plus 50 students in your community. Examine the issues affecting them and look for the intersections between their needs and what the community college can provide. Community organizations can be a helpful resource when reaching out to listen and learn from this population.

### Review your registration and admission policies.

Consider how friendly your admission and registration processes are for people who are not coming directly from high school to community college. Imagine the frustration of a 58-year-old with a master's degree who has lived and worked around the globe when she is asked to produce a long-lost high school transcript to register for a re-careering course. Many colleges have revised their admissions policies for older students to help remove such barriers.

### Distribute information earmarked for plus 50 students and offer hands-on help.

Some colleges have published a course catalog and other materials specifically to market coursework and explain registration procedures for plus 50 students. Others have created website pages to respond to the specific needs of plus 50 students and designated a staff person or a plus 50 ambassador to help them with registration and logistics.

**Train advisors to support plus 50 students.** Make sure your advisors are up-to-date on re-careering programs and financial aid options for adult learners and have office hours that accommodate full-time workers. In its survey of older learners, Portland Community College found that among plus 50 students seeking academic advising services, half were dissatisfied. Many felt they received inconsistent and conflicting advice designed for students in their teens, not someone seeking to update a career and get a new job after a couple of semesters.

**Re-think how your programs are delivered and re-design them with the needs of plus 50 learners in mind.** To accommodate plus 50 students, consider flexible courses focused on careers, convenient scheduling, designated staff to manage programs for plus 50 students, professional development training in pedagogy for faculty teaching older students, and special support services.

**Consider creative financing.** Financial aid vehicles may need to be restructured with short-term adult learners in mind. Many people turning to community colleges to update their skills so they can continue working don't have extra money available to spend on coursework and books. The Portland Community College survey found that six out of ten responding baby boomer students reported financial concerns as the second biggest roadblock to education they encounter.

Many states have policies in place to subsidize community college tuition for older learners, but restrictions may limit financial aid to full-time students on a degree path. Policies like these hurt plus 50 students who want to return to campus for a few courses that will help them stay in the workplace.

In some states—because formula funding of higher education is structured to penalize community colleges when students do not take for-credit courses or complete degrees—some community colleges face particular hurdles in cultivating a revenue stream that can support plus 50 programs. Many colleges have turned to private support to supplement tuition and fees.

The Senior Community Service Employment Program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor,

is placing economically disadvantaged students in community colleges for re-careering help. Additional public policy leadership and support are critical if community colleges are to foster successful learning environments for plus 50 students.

In addition, a survey of higher education institutions by the American Council on Education found that older adults were often unaware of financial assistance that was available, “due in large part to lack of promotion by the institutions.” Community colleges need to ensure that plus 50 students are informed of whatever financial aid resources are available to them.

**For more information about AACC's Plus 50 Initiative, go to <http://plus50.aacc.nche.edu>.**

## References

- American Association of Community Colleges. *Plus 50 Initiative national survey of community colleges about programs and services for plus 50 students* (forthcoming).
- American Council on Education & the MetLife Foundation. *Mapping new directions: Higher education for older adults*. November 2008. [www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/CLLL/Reinvesting/MapDirections.pdf](http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/CLLL/Reinvesting/MapDirections.pdf)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. July 2008. *Spotlight on Statistics: Older Workers*. [www.bls.gov/spotlight/2008/older\\_workers/](http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2008/older_workers/)
- Eduventures. 2008. *The Adult Learner: An Eduventures Perspective*.
- Palasesi, L.M. & Bower, B.L. 2006. “Self-identity modification and intent to return: Baby boomers reinvent themselves using the community college.” *Community College Review*, 34 (1).
- Portland Community College Taskforce on Aging. 2007. *Boomers go to college. A report on the survey of students 40 and older*. Presented at Age Boom Conference.
- Wilson, L.B.; Harlow-Rosentraub, K.; Manning, T.; Simson, S.; and Steele, J. 2007. *Civic engagement and lifelong learning*. American Society on Aging. [www.asaging.org/publications/dbase/GEN/Gen.30\\_4.Wilson.pdf](http://www.asaging.org/publications/dbase/GEN/Gen.30_4.Wilson.pdf)