

BEYOND 'BEST FIT':

Why Differences in Predictive Analytics Matters

By: Jessica Leigh Brown

Community colleges exist to serve their communities—and increasingly, that means attracting and retaining adult students. At Henry Ford College in Dearborn, Michigan, about half the students are over age 25, and VP of Marketing and Communications Rhonda DeLong expects that percentage to grow.

“Adult student recruitment is essential, and it’s hard,” says DeLong. That’s because unlike high school students, adult prospects are rarely gathered in one place. “They also have different priorities and expectations than traditional students, so you need to approach them with a very strong value proposition.”

As student populations become more demographically and culturally diverse, college marketing leaders need to shift their approach to connect with new prospects.



Rhonda DeLong
VP of Marketing and Communications
Henry Ford College

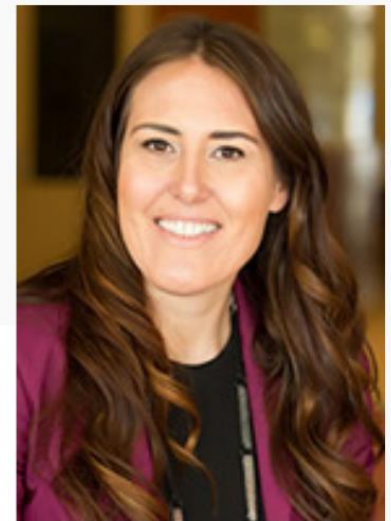
THE PROBLEM WITH "BEST FIT" MARKETING



Traditionally, a college or university looked at its current student body to determine how to recruit future classes—but that approach leaves out many potential prospects. “The concept of marketing to ‘best fit’ students is exclusionary,” says DeLong. “We don’t want students to fit with us. We want to fit with them.”

Instead, DeLong says, community colleges should move toward every potential student who wants to succeed. “We’re open access, so we need to go out of our way to find and support those potential students who have the intent to pursue higher education.”

“Kristen Huyck, director of public and governmental relations, marketing, and communications at MiraCosta College in Oceanside, California, agrees. “Adult students often face many additional barriers to pursuing education, such as childcare, time constraints, and financial challenges,” Huyck says. “We need to make sure we can provide the critical support they need—and communicate those solutions clearly in our marketing.”



Kristen Huyck
Director of Public and
Governmental Relations,
Marketing & Communications
MiraCosta College



BEST PRACTICES

With diverse adult students in mind, here are six best practices recommendations from DeLong and Huyck.



1. MEET PROSPECTS ON THEIR TERMS: BECOME A STUDENT-READY INSTITUTION

Becoming a student-ready college means preparing for the needs of incoming students. One way to do that is by streamlining processes such as admissions and advising. “We’re looking at how to pare down our forms and documents and ask, ‘What do we really need to get people in the door?’” says DeLong. “We want to meet people where they are and recognize that adult students have different needs and expectations than traditional students.”



2. INTENT MATTERS: ACCESS DATA FOCUSED ON FUTURE BEHAVIOR

Student lists have long been a key recruiting tool for colleges and universities. Because data analysis is highly effective, a recent report from The Institute for College Access & Success argued for a national, publicly available student list to help colleges and universities with recruiting efforts.

Before launching a marketing effort, institutions should review available student list data and consider which communities and demographics have adults with significant intent to enroll in college. Looking at data around intent can often reveal unexpected insights and guide marketing efforts in the right direction.

CollegeAPP, a data modeling tool that utilizes both publicly and commercially available data sources, identifies adults with educational intent through large sample surveys and machine learning predictive analytics. Recently, CollegeAPP reviewed national data that revealed respondents from minority communities are more than twice as likely as white students to express intent to enroll in college. “Specifically, forty percent of Hispanic or Latinx adults and 39 percent of Black or African American adults plan to enroll in postsecondary education compared to just 16 percent of white adults,” says Andy Carlson, vice president of state strategy at CollegeAPP. “These trends hold across age groups, levels of education, and income.”



3. TELL YOUR COMPELLING STORY: AND HOW IT WORKS FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

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DeLong and her team members ask current students and alumni to tell their stories in a compelling way. “We want their voices telling their stories, such as ‘I was a single black mom; I went to college, and now I’m running my own business.’ Or ‘I came back to school at age 60 and was able to learn how to use computers and step up in my career.’ Those authentic voices help to eliminate the idea of fit.”



4. MEET THE MODALITY CHALLENGE: OFFER ONLINE AND HYBRID OPTIONS

Getting to campus to attend classes is often a barrier for adult students who may have jobs or other time constraints. Online courses can open the door of opportunity for many students, but others may be reluctant to pursue online-only education. Henry Ford College has developed an array of online, hybrid, and in-person options. “The key is giving them choices so they can customize their program,” says DeLong. “We also offer classes to help people learn to succeed in online environments.”



5. ENABLE SUCCESS: DESIGN PROGRAMS WITH MILESTONES

Adult students are often returning to college after a long hiatus or coming for the first time. For them, the idea of pursuing a four-year degree—or even a two-year program that requires full-time attendance—can be daunting. Colleges can make their programs more attractive and attainable to adult students by building in helpful goals along the way. “For example, create a stackable credit program where the student can attain the first credential in one semester, go on to get their associates’ degree, and then their bachelor’s,” says DeLong. “The key is having milestones along the way that are beneficial to the student in their career.”



6. IT TAKES A COMMUNITY: BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

When targeting specific demographics and underserved communities with their recruitment marketing, colleges must build meaningful relationships with community organizations, employers, and other institutions in order to succeed. “We really focus on developing relationships with employers, finding out where the gaps are in their workforce and what skills are needed, and getting their input as we develop curriculum,” says Huyck. “It creates a symbiotic relationship where they know our graduates are ready to walk into jobs.”

MiraCosta College also collaborates with public and private universities in the region, creating pathways to transfer easily. “With one institution, we have what we call a two plus two program,” says Huyck. “Students complete two years here, and then the university comes and teaches classes at our location so they can finish their bachelor’s degree without having to transfer.”

At Henry Ford College, DeLong leverages statewide programs designed to bring in adult students, along with building partnerships with community and civic organizations. “You need robust partnerships across all sectors,” says DeLong. “We also have an ambassadors program where students and neighbors can talk to people in their communities to help build trust.”

Ultimately, successful adult student recruitment is about precision marketing and relationship building. “We have to listen to the individual,” DeLong says. “And then we have to be thoughtful, creative, and resourceful to help overcome the barriers they’re facing and see them succeed.”

