

Exploring the College (Re)Enrollment Decisions among Adult Learners of Color

Using the *Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories* to Understand the Role of Ecosystems and Shaping Experiences

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Introduction

Background: The Importance of Understanding College-Going Decisions among Adult Learners of Color

Many institutions in the United States continue to express interest in recruiting and enrolling adult learners (Donaldson, 2022). This makes sense, given that fewer high school graduates are enrolling directly in postsecondary education, leading to enrollment declines for many institutions. In addition, institutions and states have committed to improving degree attainment and social mobility. Together, these trends have elevated enrollment among adult learners as an important priority for institutions. And there are many adults to serve: More than 82 million learners over the age of 25 have never enrolled in postsecondary education, and 40.4 million adult learners have some college credits but no degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse, 2023). In particular, Black, Latino, and American Indian adults are more likely to fall into these categories than their White counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). For institutions working to fulfill their missions and boost enrollment, effectively serving these adults is a critical goal.

But institutions generally are not designed to serve adult learners, and particularly not adult learners of color.¹ Although colleges have evolved in important ways as their student populations have grown and shifted over time, core elements of institutions' structures, practices, and recruiting rest on fundamental assumptions developed when colleges primarily enrolled students coming directly from high school (Jain & Crisp, 2018). More specifically, fundamental designs were set when postsecondary institutions primarily served upper-class White men, when women and people of color were excluded from most institutions by both law and practice (Garcia, 2019; Harris, 2021). As such, inviting, recruiting, and serving adult learners—and especially adult learners of color—requires new approaches by institutions that involve meaningful changes to the full experience for learners.

Despite extensive interest among institutions in engaging a broader range of adult learners, the field has an incomplete understanding of their full experiences, along with what kind of changes by institutions might be valuable to them. A key concept that is under-explored—and serves as

¹ We define adult learners as adults between the ages of 25 and 64 who currently do not have a postsecondary education credential but are either currently enrolled or considering (re)enrolling. We broadly consider adult learners of color to include adult learners that identify as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or Indigenous, Asian or Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Please see the Methods section for details about the sample involved in this research.

a useful starting point—is exploring the decision-making process of adult learners of color who may, or do, consider enrolling in postsecondary education. Understanding the decisions, including when, why, and how they happen, might help the field better recruit and serve adult learners of color.

This Series

This report is one of a series of resources from a study that explored the college-going decision-making experiences of adult learners of color in postsecondary education. This study takes a broad view of the decision-making process; the study team believed a broad view would be valuable, in that it would allow us to uncover important dynamics, experiences, people, or information that shape and affect the decisions and trajectories of adult learners of color. For additional insights, perspectives, and findings, please visit our website: www.air.org/postsec-adultlearners.

This Report

In this report, AIR shares an exploratory analysis of how the past and present experiences of adult learners of color shape their perceptions of college and decisions they make. Existing research highlights some common motivations, strengths, and barriers for adult learners (see, e.g., Patterson, 2018); however, it does not deeply explore the full educational journeys of adult learners, which begin long before they enroll in postsecondary institutions as adults. In addition, much of the current research does not focus explicitly on adult learners of color, and when it does, it focuses more on learners' experiences once they are enrolled, rather than exploring their full trajectories and the key decisions they make along the way. The small number of studies that have focused explicitly on adult learners of color have identified unique postsecondary issues, including the desire of these learners to earn credit for prior learning assessment in foreign languages and the negative effects of classroom climates (Coker, 2003; Jain & Crisp, 2018; Klein-Collins, 2020). These research insights underscore the importance of examining the interplay between past and present experiences in shaping adult learners' perceptions and decisions around college and education.

To address this gap, our research aims to deepen our understanding of the experiences adult learners of color have with postsecondary education by exploring how their past and present experiences shape their perceptions of college and the decisions they make. We draw on Iloh's (2019) Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories to frame our analysis and uncover the factors that contribute to adult learners' decisions about pursuing higher education, choosing not to pursue it, and everything in between. Our key research question is:

How and when do adult learners of color make decisions about (re)enrolling in postsecondary education? What factors contribute to those decisions?

We also explore the role that adult learners’ “ecosystems”—the individuals close to them who might be affected by someone’s decision to return to college or who support or guide their decision making—play in shaping learners’ experiences.

Relevant Literature

Adult learners live full lives outside of their educational experiences, with many commitments and responsibilities. For instance, Gragnano et al. (2020) found that adult learners are more likely to be employed full time, have family commitments, and have previous educational and work experiences compared to learners who enter postsecondary education directly from high school. These factors affect the decisions they make about college going and whether college is feasible for them. Relatedly, although college affordability is a concern for most learners of any age, financial concerns may be more pronounced for adult learners, who may be supporting families and need to consider factors like transportation, childcare, and other associated costs (and opportunity costs in the form of lost wages) of attending college (Hunte et al., 2020; Kimmel et al., 2014; Radford et al., 2021).

In addition to the need to consider practical implications of balancing family, work, and other commitments with postsecondary education, the information that adult learners receive about postsecondary education can influence their decision making. Research has shown that messaging from families related to college is not always helpful. Hunte et al. (2020) report that many adult learners were told growing up that work was more important than college, and some women were told to focus on parenting. First-generation students said they did not receive information on college, and Latino participants felt pressure to stay close to family due to cultural expectations. On the other hand, families can provide key support for adult learners, potentially leading them to view postsecondary education more positively (Karmelita, 2018).

Research also suggests that adult learners’ personal and professional experiences play a crucial role in their educational experiences. For example, Kasworm (2010) highlights how personal and professional experiences—including previous educational achievements, employment history, and family responsibilities—shape adult learners’ motivations, aspirations, and apprehensions about returning to school. Similarly, many adult learners have attended college before and may have internalized previous negative experiences (O’Donnel & Tobbell, 2007). Adults of color may face additional challenges; for example, Goings (2015) found that Black men reported a lack of role models who are adult learners in college, which affects their self-perception.

Existing literature highlights a number of common experiences and challenges adult learners face in postsecondary education. There is, however, a dearth of research specifically about adult learners of color. Existing research tends to focus more on the experiences of learners

once they are already enrolled, without considering the complex decision-making processes they undertake throughout their lives and in which they continue to engage even after enrolling. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on how adult learners of color perceive postsecondary education and the factors that influence their decision making.

Conceptual Framework

To understand the decisions that adult learners of color make about postsecondary education and how they make those decisions at different points throughout their educational trajectories, we draw heavily on the Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories (Iloh, 2019). Iloh’s model was developed as an alternative to well-established college choice frameworks in the field that do not adequately account for inequities in the college-going process, particularly for learners of color or “nontraditional” learners. The model also can help develop our understanding of the college-going decision-making process for those for whom college enrollment is not a “one-time event” immediately after high school.

The Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories illustrates three dimensions that factor into learners’ decisions and trajectories—**information, time, and opportunity**—which can “expand or reduce one’s college-going possibilities based on a person’s identity, life circumstances, and social position” (Iloh, 2019, p. 4). Unlike previous models of college choice, these dimensions are not sequential or linear; rather, they are distinct components that overlap and influence one another and can be used to understand decision making at many points throughout a learner’s trajectory.

The **information dimension** in Iloh’s model examines the knowledge, resources, and insights individuals possess or seek for college decisions. This dimension considers how people access, interpret, and navigate available data, taking into account the influence of societal norms, cultural values, personal networks, and educational institutions. Iloh points to the importance of the “who and how” (Iloh, 2019, p. 5) of information delivery, noting that the tone of messaging, whether it comes from a trusted source, and the platform through which it is delivered is important. Iloh also points to a key potential source of inequities in information. The term *information deserts*, based on the concept of *food deserts*, refers to the idea that some communities face limited access to essential information about college going. It emphasizes the negative impact of information scarcity on education, employment, and social mobility.

The **time dimension** provides insight into events that have shaped a person’s life. From simple questions that shed light on a person’s state of mind or being at the time of a decision, to understanding how major events or shifts in societal norms over time affect decision making,

using the dimension of time helps us understand the context in which individuals make decisions about college going. To illustrate the distinction between the different levels of time, Iloh references Bronfenbrenner and Morris's bio-ecological model of time, which includes micro-time (individual-level discrete events), meso-time (the collection of events over an individual's life), and macro-time (society-level events and shifts in cultural norms or social expectations).

Finally, the **opportunity dimension** speaks to learners' perceptions of what is possible for them in terms of postsecondary education. Learners' perceptions of opportunities are shaped by their individual contexts, especially by factors like finance, geography, technology, or family. Perceptions of opportunities also can be influenced by the way information is shared and the persistent inequities in information sharing that systematically disadvantage marginalized communities. Similarly, campus climates that are not welcoming to some students can shape their perceptions of whether an institution really presents an opportunity for them.

Iloh's model serves as a valuable framework for understanding college-going decision making. The model is particularly well suited to studying the experiences of adult learners of color, given its focus on disrupting traditional linear models of college choice and accounting for the fact that learners' journeys may take a long time and are heavily influenced by their individual life contexts.

Methods

To center the narratives of adult learners of color, and to follow Iloh's (2019) assertion that using the model of college-going decision making "requires a nearness to participants and their realities in a way that positions the participant as expert in participants' experiences and places primacy on the environment and context around them" (p. 7), we used a life-history narrative interview approach to data collection. This approach centers the learners' voices and stories and lets learners discuss not only their personal story but also aspects of their social, economic, and political contexts that they view as important. This approach allows participants' stories, rather than an interview protocol, to guide the interview. In addition, because adult learners' experiences vary widely, narrative interviews enable us to develop a deep understanding of the variation and nuance in experiences that may not be captured when interviews follow a predetermined set of questions (Kothari & Hulme, 2004; Sosulski et al., 2010). To support consistency across interviews with regard to key topics, the interview protocols included several discussion prompts related to early experiences with education, the decision-making process around applying to and enrolling in postsecondary education, and holistic reflections on postsecondary educational journeys.

To recruit interview participants, AIR partnered with postsecondary institutions in three states (California, Georgia, and Texas) to share the opportunity with learners between the ages of 25 and 65 who either were currently enrolled in postsecondary education or were enrolled within the last 10 years. The final sample for this analysis included 16 adult learners of color (nine women and seven men) who ranged in age from 31 to 57. Six participants identified as Black; six identified as Hispanic/Latino; one participant identified as Asian; one identified as Pacific Islander (Polynesian); one identified as American Indian and White; and another identified as American Indian, Hispanic, and Asian (see Table 1 for more details). Seven interviewees were employed full time, while others either worked in part-time jobs or did not report working. All interviewees were enrolled in postsecondary education at the time of the interview, and 16 were previously enrolled. Nine adult learners had enrolled directly after high school. Nine were parents, and three had experienced incarceration. We provided \$150 total in gift cards to those who completed all three interviews to acknowledge and thank them for their time and for their meaningful engagement with our team.

Table 1. Interview Participants’ Pseudonyms and Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Betty	39	Hispanic	Female
Charles	39	Black	Male
Charlie	33	Hispanic	Male
Eric	33	Asian	Male
Jennifer	57	Black	Female
Julia	31	Hispanic	Female
Kai	45	Pacific Islander	Male
Linda	55	Black	Male
Marvin	46	Black	Male
Mary	41	Hispanic	Female
Max	42	Black	Male
Mia	49	American Indian, Hispanic, Asian-Indian	Female
Nancy	43	Hispanic	Female
Susan	54	American Indian, White	Female
William	32	Hispanic	Male

To identify key themes related to our guiding research question, we conducted a thematic analysis, an approach designed to identify key themes and patterns in data. In a thematic analysis, researchers look for meaning across a data set and for shared meaning and themes related to identified research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Our approach to the thematic analysis was grounded in Iloh's (2019) framework for college-going decision making; we worked to identify themes related to the dimensions of time, opportunity, and information with an eye toward themes that are unique to, or that illustrate, the experiences of adult learners of color. We began by familiarizing ourselves with the qualitative data by reading interview transcripts and developing a codebook to include broad themes related to the research questions to be addressed in the analysis. We then coded interviews using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo and identified key themes that addressed the study's research question.

The research team that conducted interviews and analyzed the data included one Asian-American woman, one Black man, three Black women, one White Hispanic man, one Latina woman, one White man, and three White women. All research team members have postsecondary education backgrounds in the behavioral and social sciences, and varying levels of behavioral and social science research training and experience. Four team members have experience working at postsecondary institutions. Collectively, the researchers have first- or second-hand experience with themes pertaining to adult learner experiences participating in education (e.g., experience as an adult learner, a person of color, a first-generation student).

The research team reflected on how their interpretation of interview participants' responses likely was informed by team members' own lived experiences, including disciplinary training and postsecondary experiences. The team's use of thematic analysis helped maintain the integrity of the participants' narratives by allowing themes to emerge through analysis and collaborative discussion. In addition, the use of calibration exercises and multiple coders per interview for a subset of the data helped mitigate the impact of individual biases.

Findings

Adult Learners' Ecosystems

Throughout the interviews we conducted with adult learners of color, we observed a recurring theme: the role of the adult learners' ecosystem. We conceptualize the ecosystem as close individuals in learners' lives, including those who are affected by learners' decisions about college going and those who influence or support learners' decisions. Individuals in our

interviewees' ecosystems included partners, children, parents, friends, and those for whom individuals provide care. They also included individuals who influence learners' decisions, including mentors, who provide support and guidance, and information brokers, who serve as trusted information sources to help learners through their decision-making process.

In reflecting on their experiences with postsecondary education, many interviewees spoke about the influence that members of their ecosystems have on their decisions, including their earliest exposure to messaging about college in the home and school and about the ways in which learners' ecosystems played a role in their decision to enroll, stop out, or not enroll. Through the lens of Iloh's (2019) Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories, we observed the ecosystem playing an important role in the ways that each of the three dimensions—information, time, and opportunity—influence learners' perceptions of and decision making about postsecondary education. Learners' ecosystems influence these dimensions in two ways. First, they shape learners' initial and longer-term perceptions of information, time, and opportunity. Second, they play a role in changing how learners perceive these dimensions. A change in a learner's ecosystem may introduce new information or experiences into the learner's life that can alter how they perceive information, time, and opportunity.

In the sections that follow, we explore the dimensions of information, time, and opportunity and how they influence the perceptions of adult learners of color and their decisions about postsecondary education. We pay special attention to when and how the ecosystem plays a role in these dimensions and consider how the ecosystem's role may be unique to adult learners of color.

Information

As described previously, Iloh's model (2019) highlights the role of information in college-going decision making, particularly with regard to how individuals access, interpret, and navigate information within their own life contexts. Iloh points to the inequitable distribution of information among communities, especially communities of color. Our findings are consistent with Iloh's model, and they advance our understanding of the experiences of adult learners of color by highlighting the role of information, not just in the transition from high school to college but also in the way that information about college is absorbed throughout learners' lives and the impact that information has on their decisions later in life. We also consider how information may play a role beyond the decision to attend college and also in the ongoing decisions that adults of color must make throughout their postsecondary journeys.

Ecosystems play a role in shaping information early in learners' lives, leading to lasting perspectives about postsecondary education.

Among the adult learners we interviewed, their views on postsecondary education often were shaped by the information they received in the home and from family members when they were young. The information that families shared was shaped by their own diverse experiences with postsecondary education. When we asked learners to recall their earliest experiences with education, several learners who identified as immigrants described receiving messaging from their family about the importance of work over school, or how college was unattainable due to their racial/ethnic background. Charlie, for example, reflected on the information he received from his family: “Mexicans don’t pursue college or even think about going to college, you know? Our heritage is work, you know, to provide ... All that fancy college stuff is for the White kids.” Another adult learner, Eric, explained that his immigrant parents lacked knowledge and experience to guide him and his sister toward college. Other learners’ families shared their experiences with college early on, like Mia’s family. She remembers being introduced to the concept of college at a young age, around 5 or 6, during a car ride with her father, who would often talk about his university and getting an MBA.

Interactions with high school staff and teachers shape how adult learners of color perceive their own readiness for postsecondary education.

Early school experiences had lasting effects on interviewees’ perceptions of postsecondary education, which is particularly salient, especially when learners’ ecosystems may not have been supportive or had their own experience with postsecondary education to draw on to help the learners, as described previously. Several interviewees described their experiences with high school teachers and staff, sharing that they felt they had received less guidance or poorer quality information about college options than their White peers. For example, Kai described his perception of how students from low-income families in his high school received information about college:

I don’t really recall kind of that, “College is next for you” type of speech, you know what I mean? ... I think, and I went to an inner-city high school, you know what I mean, lotta low-income kids, you know, just ghetto kids, like, we all lived in the ghetto. And I feel like—and maybe I’m wrong for saying this—but just my take on it was that, you know, teachers would identify those kids who are showing potential or have that desire, you know what I mean, to move on to the next level, and maybe that’s where the focus for encouragement [was] and, like, go to, you know, to that next step; maybe that’s where all that time and energy went.

Similarly, when asked if she ever discussed college with her high school teachers, Mia said, “I grew up in a very different environment that was not accustomed to my skin tone. So I did not grow up in a school place where they talked about college for me.”

Other interviewees described their teachers or guidance counselors as having a “passive” or less proactive approach to sharing information about college. This perceived attitude led some learners, like Charles, to lack interest in or the motivation to attend college, acknowledging that it “allowed me after high school to kind of just flow through life.” Another interviewee, Julia, attributed the lack of proactive outreach to counselors prioritizing support for students with top grades. She shared that this led her to believe that college was not for her: “I thought it was just, like, for smart kids, like those kids, like the ones with good grades. Like obviously I did not, so I never even thought [about going].”

Information can facilitate or influence the direction of adult learners’ decisions about postsecondary education.

When reflecting on decisions they made about postsecondary education as adults, learners described how they used information they had received, or how that information enabled them to apply or enroll. For example, Charles described touring various college campuses when he was thinking of pursuing postsecondary education, through which he received information about supports that different institutions had available. This information enabled him to find one institution where he felt he would be supported, which in turn spurred his decision to enroll there:

It just seemed like a fit. So I just remember just feeling like, I feel good about this decision. And so that was kind of like the thought process and part of that emotion that kind of went into the, the beginning stage of enrolling in class and then picking, picking the classes that I would, that I would take.

Similarly, Jennifer talked about using information she received about the possibility of work-study to inform her decision about college going, and Marvin shared that another student provided information and served as a “facilitator” during his application and enrollment process:

I had some social capital, but he was there and he was kind of, you know, introducing me to certain professors to take and, and on how to do stuff. So when he transferred to [university], he basically gave me the blueprint on how to do it.

Our interviewees’ early experiences in the home and in school shaped their perceptions of whether college was a good fit for them early in life. Beyond the lasting effects of early

information about education, learners shared the ways in which information was useful to them in their decision-making process. When information and support are provided selectively based on perceptions of a student's potential or performance, individuals who also may benefit from guidance and resources are marginalized. This can perpetuate inequality and hinder the educational and personal development of learners that persists into adulthood. In addition, the variation in educational experiences and perspectives of individuals in adult learners' ecosystems may be sources of inequity, as evidenced by the previous discussion of how information from school personnel may have been subject to bias and how information received in the home (which was filtered through parents' experiences and cultural expectations) may have colored learners' perspectives about postsecondary education.

Key Findings: Information Dimension

- Ecosystems play a role in shaping information and lasting perspectives about postsecondary education.
 - Interactions with high school staff and teachers shape how adult learners of color perceive their own readiness for postsecondary education.
 - Information can facilitate or influence the direction of decisions about postsecondary education.
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Time

The time dimension of Iloh's model (2019) provides a lens through which to explore adult learners' educational journeys and how both the passing of time and discrete events affect learners' perceptions of postsecondary education. We found that the role of time for most adult learners of color was connected to the information they received and their perceptions of the opportunities available to them. In this section, we share key takeaways about the role of time in decision making about postsecondary education, through the lenses of "micro-time" and "meso-time" (changes in learners' personal contexts) and of "macro-time" (changes in the societal contexts in which learners live).

Micro-time and Meso-time

Micro-time and meso-time can be understood as changes or events that happen on an individual basis throughout a learner's life. Some changes may be sudden or discrete, like the birth or death of an immediate family member or friend, marrying or leaving a partner, or changes in physical or mental health, such that any of these events would constitute a "shock" to the learner's everyday life. On the other hand, some changes in personal context can be

more gradual, with a series of events resulting in an overall change to the learner's perception of postsecondary education. Learners' ecosystems are an integral part of these micro- and meso-time experiences, as they are the ones who make up learners' personal contexts.

Discrete events, or shocks to everyday life, can catalyze enrollment and influence learners' decisions about college (micro-time).

Interviewees reflected on various life events that influenced their motivations for and decisions about attending postsecondary education. Jennifer reflected on how a period of unemployment led to her resuming her educational journey:

I was unemployed; you know, it's a little easier when you don't have a lot of money coming in that you can get a grant [for education]. And so I was able to get that grant for going back to [college], and again, saying, "I gotta get a degree."

The change in personal finances due to her period of unemployment led Jennifer to access resources in the form of grants, which made college opportunities seem viable again. In another example, Kai shared how a medical issue that would result in a prolonged absence from the workforce initiated his college-going decision-making process. He applied to a community college after high school graduation but was unable to enroll due to financial constraints and a lack of information about financial aid. Instead, he went directly into the workforce. When medical issues meant that he no longer could continue in his physical job, he began to think about going to college:

I just started a job, and then that was it, bro; I was working, you know, every year after that. You know, until, I decided to really, until I had this operation that put me in the wheelchair, and decided like, "Okay, maybe I can, you know, get my mind right, you know, there's no more pressure. I've got my own family now, you know; let me just go to school."

Other participants discussed how shocks not only influenced the decision-making process but also added a sense of urgency to their decision making. Marvin, for example, described the impact of a relationship ending and the resulting change in his financial situation: "It was school or bust this time."

Discrete meso-time events, or shocks, also can lead participants to take breaks in enrollment. For example, Linda discussed how she left school due to an illness brought on from the stress of her managing work, taking care of her child, and going to school:

I was a single parent. So, you know, I was getting up [at] five o'clock in the morning, leaving out the house, taking my daughter to school, going to work, picking [her] up in

the evening, feeding her, dropping [her] off at the babysitter, and then going to school. And I did that 5 days a week. And one morning I woke up and my head was real heavy, wasn't feeling good. So I went to the doctor, and he told me I had pneumonia. He said whatever I am doing is stressing my body out.

These meso-time shocks, whether positive or negative, influenced learners' decisions about postsecondary education. In some cases, a discrete event led to the decision to enroll, whereas in other cases, changes in learners' life contexts meant taking a break or discontinuing enrollment.

Personal change or growth, career development, and other gradual changes led to changes in learners' perspectives on postsecondary education (meso-time).

In contrast to the effect that discrete events or shocks have in spurring decision making about college, gradual life changes over time can be influential in learners' decision making. For example, Betty reflected on challenges she faced during a previous period of enrollment, which she felt were related to her age and experience at the time: "I probably wasn't mature enough though or ready to [be in college] because I, you know? Maybe emotionally and just mature enough to be disciplined and do what I needed to do when I was there [in college]." Eric echoed these sentiments, sharing that his maturity and motivation are different compared to those of a younger student:

I think also my definition of what it, what does it mean to be fine? What does it mean to have a, a decent good life? That changes, right? But before, if I had a refrigerator full of frozen pizzas, I'm happy as a clam. Now I'll be like, "Oh, that's not good. You're gonna die. Because that's all just cholesterol." Like, you know, thinking like that evolved with time. And I think it's the same thing with my views of college.

Other participants shared how their experiences over time in the workforce led them to feel that a postsecondary credential was necessary for their career trajectories. Marvin described how he came to realize over time that he needed a postsecondary credential to advance in his career:

... And that what held them back, what held me back was that I, I didn't have that degree. I'm like, yeah, just having that piece of paper, it, it is important. And I think, uh, back then, when I was younger, I didn't really understand that, because I didn't know what it takes to, say, move up in promotions or move up this way or that way. Like back then I still had a naive notion of, oh, if you do a good job in a company, you'll get promoted. That's not how life works.

None of the participants shared instances in which gradual changes in perception led them to choose to take a break in enrollment, though this does not imply no such circumstances exist.

Macro-time

In contrast to the individual nature of micro- and meso-time events, macro-time events or changes are those that occur at a societal level. These can be major changes or shocks, like the September 11 terrorist attacks or the COVID-19 pandemic, or they can be gradual changes in cultural norms or institutional practices. Learners' ecosystems often are affected by macro-time events that may have a direct or an indirect effect on learners themselves.

Changes in societal norms and in postsecondary education norms influenced learners' decisions and perspectives.

Interviewees described a common macro-time effect related to changes over time in societal or cultural norms. For example, Kai remembers, "the shift when a high school diploma was no longer enough, you know what I mean, to try to get a, a decent-paying job to just even survive, especially here in our state," which changed his perception of the value of a postsecondary credential and the viability of opportunities to pursue a credential.

Other participants reflected on the changes over time in supports that postsecondary institutions provided, which enabled them to attend or be more successful in college. Susan, reflecting on her experiences, found that her institution, and society as a whole, demonstrated more empathy and compassion that she expected:

... these last few months that I spent at [a large public research institution in the Southwest], the society has become a lot more knowledgeable and understanding for people in [a] difficult situation, and they have a lot more help and assistance capability.

In addition, Mia said she found that her institution has become more inclusive and accessible over time. She observed that college campuses have "changed into, like, more inclusivity than less exclusivity, and more attainable than less attainable."

Society-level events affected learners directly and indirectly, through the impact of the events on learners' ecosystems.

Interviewees' reflections on macro-time influences included some society-level events that substantially changed their thinking about college. Usually, these events caused ongoing harm, particularly to already marginalized communities. For example, several participants reflected on spending their formative years in areas heavily impacted by the crack epidemic of the 1980s. One interviewee shared the following:

Parents were getting further in their addiction, and, um, and just the community in general was, uh, was traumatized, you know? ... I mean, it was a lot of fighting and violence, ... all this kind of stuff going on that was derailing me from focusing on school.

Another participant was one of many individuals who were incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic due to involvement in the drug trade at that time.

The COVID-19 pandemic was another macro-time event that affected interviewees' experiences with and decisions about college. For example, Charlie, who was incarcerated at the time, had been taking college courses in prison when the onset of the pandemic led to courses being canceled; he was unable to complete the credential he had been pursuing. In other cases, the pandemic influenced the decisions that interviewees made about college. For example, Nancy shared that because of the shift to online learning during the pandemic, she was able to balance work and school more easily. And Mary described how the impact of the pandemic on the restaurant industry influenced her decisions about college:

What really hit our family with, was that we're all in the restaurant industry when the pandemic hit. We all lost our jobs, so I've really not ... it was ... it's... I've been able to sort of sell this undergrad mission because I've been able to really sustain myself. And so when, when that became challenging, I was like, "What am I gonna do? I have to take something else."

In this case, the pandemic and resulting loss of income meant that college affordability concerns came to the forefront. To remain enrolled, Mary had to take on additional work.

Technological advances over time made information about postsecondary education more readily available to learners.

Another societal shift participants that discussed was how changes in technology over time made information more available to them. The age range of our participants was 32 to 64, so all of them have experienced increasing access to the internet and to internet-connected devices such as home computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. As described previously, many learners experienced bias in the way information was presented to them by school professionals; they often did not receive sufficient information about college opportunities, in an era when seeking out information online was not an option. The proliferation of digital technology means learners have greater and more direct access to information about postsecondary education.

Julia shared that when she was in high school, she didn't receive all the information she needed regarding college opportunities: "... I didn't have the grades to go to college, but now that I see,

like, you could go to, I could have gone to a community college. I would've been way done so many years ago." Eric reflected on how information has not only become more available online but also is increasingly being presented in more accessible ways for learners. Instead of relying on professionals, friends, or family members to provide information, which can be subject to personal biases and inaccuracies, the adult learner has greater agency in their educational journey because of increased accessibility to information.

Key Findings: Time Dimension

- Discrete events, or shocks to everyday life, can catalyze enrollment and influence learners' decisions about college.
 - Personal change or growth, career development, and other gradual changes led to changes in learners' perspectives on postsecondary education.
 - Changes in societal norms influenced learners' decisions and perspectives.
 - Society-level events affected learners directly and indirectly, through the events' impacts on learners' ecosystems.
 - Technological advances over time made information about postsecondary education more readily available to learners.
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Opportunity

The third dimension of Iloh's model, opportunity, focuses on learners' perceptions of what is possible for them with regard to postsecondary education. Consistent with Iloh's (2019) model, we found that adult learners' perceptions of opportunities are heavily influenced by information and time. We found that messaging and information that learners received during their formative years and information they gained through lived experiences as adults, influenced by the learners' ecosystem, were key influences on their ideas of what is or is not possible. We also introduce the concept of *viability*—how adult learners of color perceive whether an existing opportunity is feasible or “a good fit” for them; we assert that perceived viability is a key influencing factor in learners' decisions about enrollment.

Opportunities need to be both present and viable for adult learners of color to decide to enroll in postsecondary education.

Our findings reveal two key elements of how learners perceive opportunities related to postsecondary education. The first dimension, *presence*, refers to learners' perceptions of whether an opportunity is available. The second element, *viability*, refers to learners' perception of whether an existing opportunity is feasible for them. Based on interviewees'

reflections about how they thought about opportunities, we suggest that the *viability* of an opportunity, as opposed to simply whether that opportunity is present, is a key catalyst for learners' decisions to enroll. A number of factors can influence learners' perceptions of viability. These include affordability, location, institutional characteristics, influences from learners' ecosystems, and life events or changes. These factors reflect the information and time dimensions described previously. In this section, we share some examples of factors that influenced learners' decisions, with attention accorded to ways in which these factors made postsecondary education seem viable.

Financial aid and affordability are common factors that shaped learners' perceptions of whether a postsecondary opportunity was viable. Linda described how the availability of grants led to them realizing that they could return to school. Similarly, Jennifer shared how the opportunity to apply for a scholarship "pushed" her to make the decision to apply.

That was right after moving to Texas, getting married, having my baby. And, I felt like, um, it was because I had a scholarship as well, I had an opportunity to apply for a scholarship. So that was like a push as well to say, "okay, let me, let me go for this."

In another example, financial resources available through a member of the learner's ecosystem, combined with affordability, played an important role in the learner's decision making. Max said,

[M]y mom told me that, wherever I went, she would, she would pay the first semester... so, when I looked into [a four-year institutions] and any of the two-year institutions, the, the amount was significantly less, um, so that was a factor.

Learners discussed instances in which they perceived that opportunities were not viable for them. Some participants reported that the timing was not right for them to explore college opportunities, that their personal context in that moment did not allow for it. One participant, William, described a situation like this:

I was approached by an academic counselor who was talking about, hey, you know, talking about college—this, this, and that. You know, I wasn't really interested in what she had to say. I kind of felt like at this point in my life, I needed to just be working. You know, it costs to live so that should be my focus.

Learners' ecosystems were influential in learners' decisions about whether opportunities were viable. For example, Charles reflected on a conversation with a mentor he met through a community-based organization when he still was unsure about the viability of college opportunities. He remembered the mentor asking, "Well, Charles, what if you would take one

class?” He said, “Just one. You think you can take one?” I’m like, “Well, I mean I guess I can take one, right.” I’m like, “What’s one class?” The opportunity now seemed more viable.

As described previously, other participants explained that messaging and information they received from authority figures, such as teachers and parents, during their formative years led to the perception that postsecondary opportunities were not viable. A couple of participants mentioned that they weren’t identified as “a good student” or that they believed they couldn’t receive merit- or need-based scholarships. These beliefs influenced their perceptions of postsecondary opportunities well into adulthood.

Key Findings: Opportunity Dimension

- Learners’ perceptions of opportunity are influenced by the information and time dimensions; the role of ecosystems is woven throughout these experiences.
 - Opportunities need to be both present and viable for adult learners of color to decide to enroll in postsecondary education.
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Conclusion and Implications

The dimensions of information, time, and opportunity play a key role in understanding the decision making that adult learners of color make throughout their educational journeys, which may include multiple enrollments and institutions over the course of their lives. These experiences, plus many others over time, remain with learners and influence their decision making. As institutions seek out ways to attract and meet the needs of adult learners, understanding the ways in which information, time, and opportunity affect decision making and the role of ecosystems for adult learners of color can help inform how institutions design and conduct outreach. Although institutions cannot change past experiences that may have negatively shaped adult learners’ perceptions of postsecondary education, understanding these experiences can help institutions create messages that make postsecondary opportunities viable for adult learners.

We offer implications for practice that can help institutions reduce inequities in messaging and information, facilitating meaningful connection with and support for adult learners of color. These implications highlight the importance of promoting equal access to information, enhancing family engagement and support, fostering inclusive and supportive school environments, training educators and administrators on equity and cultural sensitivity, collaborating with community organizations and other resources, and conducting ongoing

research and assessment. The implications for practice outlined in this section address the multifaceted nature of information disparities in education and provide actionable strategies to bridge the gaps.

- **Promote equal access to relevant and tailored information.** Make efforts to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances, have equal access to information about educational opportunities. This can be achieved through targeted outreach to adult learners of color and members of their ecosystems through collaboration with community organizations, providing resources in multiple languages, and leveraging technology to bridge information gaps.
- **Collaborate with community organizations and provide resources.** Establish partnerships with community organizations and other resources (e.g., churches, nonprofit organizations serving different adult populations, veterans' organizations) to expand access to information and support services for students. These services can include mentorship programs, college readiness workshops, and college fairs to expose students to various educational opportunities.
- **Train postsecondary staff and faculty who work with adult learners on equity and cultural competence.** Provide professional development opportunities for postsecondary staff and faculty who work with adult learners (e.g., advisors, admissions officers, faculty members) to enhance their understanding of educational equity, cultural diversity, and the impact of their attitudes and expectations on learners. Ensure that those working with adult learners understand the importance of adult learners' ecosystems, such that they can provide information that would be meaningful to learners' ecosystems and, when appropriate, engage with members of learners' ecosystems.

We also offer recommendations for future research, based on key findings that emerged through this work:

- **Explore the distinctions in college-going decision making for adult learners of color and adult learners who are White.** This study focused on and centered the experiences of adult learners of color, but insights regarding differences between the two groups can inform the design of equity-oriented solutions to support adult learners of color.
- **Explore learners' ecosystems and the ways in which they vary.** Emerging research suggests that there are key differences in the ecosystems of adult learners of color (Jones, forthcoming), which merits further study to understand potential inequities. Throughout this study, the role of the ecosystem was highly influential in learners' decision making. A deeper understanding of ecosystem composition, and possible

differences between different racial or ethnic groups, could help inform tailored supports and mitigate potential inequities.

This report explored the experiences and trajectories of a population of learners that postsecondary education historically has not served effectively. The insights gained, derived from distinct and unique narratives of 16 adult learners of color, begin to address the lack of understanding we have about the experiences of adult learners of color and, in turn, address the field's failure to meet their needs. These implications for practice and considerations for future research are designed to advance the field toward better serving the needs of adult learners of color, supporting their college-going decision making, and positioning them to succeed and earn a postsecondary credential.

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