

Trusted Networks

Understanding How People
Influence Adult Learner
(Re)Enrollment Decisions

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Introduction

Background

Many postsecondary institutions seek to enroll and serve more adult learners—defined here as those who are 25 years old or older. Their motivation for doing so is often twofold: (a) to fulfill their missions, and (b) to bolster their own enrollment as the pool of high school graduates declines (Smith, 2021). In terms of mission, many open-access regional institutions may prioritize serving adult learners to help provide economic stability and opportunity for their community. In environments characterized by an aging workforce, increasing inflation, and stagnant wages, a postsecondary credential still represents one of the best opportunities for economic advancement (Ma & Pender, 2023). As for expanding enrollment, the pool of potential adult learners is large: More than 82 million adults in the United States have never enrolled in postsecondary education, and nearly 42 million adults have some college credits but have not completed a credential—a number that has grown in recent years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Most recent data available show that only a small share of such adults have decided to enroll in a postsecondary program, and the number is down from prior years: In 2023, 3.9 million adult learners were enrolled in undergraduate programs, down from 4.3 million in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Understanding the decisions that potential adult learners make about enrolling or reenrolling is important to supporting institutions' efforts to enroll and serve this population. This brief examines those decisions, with a particular focus on who in the learners' lives might be involved in that process and what kind of influence they have on the decisions adults make about whether or not to enroll or reenroll in college. Previous research shows that learners do not make decisions in a vacuum, and that those deciding on college immediately after high school frequently rely on help from resources (e.g., guidance counselors, teachers, and parents) that adult learners may not access in the same way (Moogan et al., 1999). Research by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) confirms that the role of learner “ecosystems”—the close people affecting and affected by a learner's education journey—is an important factor in their decision-making process (Parsons et al., 2023).

This report focuses on examining the ecosystems of Black, Hispanic, and Native American adult learners, collectively termed “adult learners of color” in this report, because these groups represent a large population and are particularly likely to have some college credit but no credential or no college experience. Black, Hispanic, and Native American adult learners represent 19.1%, 24.4%, and 1.4% of learners, respectively, with some credit and no credential but only 14%, 21.5%, and .9% of the total undergraduate population (National Student Clearinghouse Resource Center, 2024). Therefore, these populations may be important for institutions to understand better, as doing so supports economic opportunity and vitality in their communities and may bolster enrollment amid the anticipated decline in the number of high school graduates (Lane et al., 2024).

This Series

This brief is one in a series of resources from a research project focused on efforts to support postsecondary enrollment and success for adult learners of color. This study builds on AIR's previous research (Parsons et al., 2023) that focused on the (re)enrollment decision-making process of adult learners by examining their lifelong education journeys and how that affects enrollment decisions. To find additional insights, perspectives, and findings from this research please visit our website: www.air.org/postsec-adultlearners.

This Report

In this brief, AIR shares key findings from our study about the role of adult learners' ecosystems in influencing and supporting their decisions about (re)enrolling in college. Within the context of this study, adult learners' "ecosystems" are defined as the close people who affect and are affected by the learner's education decision making.

Our analysis explores who makes up a learner's ecosystem; their influence on learner decisions; and the sentiments, opinions, and/or support they shared with the learners during the period leading up to the enrollment decision.

We address the following key research questions:

- What are the characteristics of adult learners' information ecosystems? Do these characteristics vary by race/ethnicity?
- How do learner ecosystems influence the learner's decision making about (re) enrolling in college?

Relevant Literature

Adult Learner Enrollment in Postsecondary Education

As state and public policy organizations push to increase the number of adults enrolling in and completing college, there has been an uptick in research exploring the college enrollment of adult learners. Many explore both intrinsic (personal goals) and extrinsic (financial improvement, career advancement) factors behind their decisions to enroll (Broekemier, 2002; Gardner et al., 2022; Ross-Gordon, 2005; Yoo & Huang, 2013). Researchers also have examined the specific barriers and concerns adult learners face when considering the feasibility or value of college enrollment (e.g., insufficient information on the enrollment process, concerns about the effectiveness of online learning, concerns about being able to afford college on top of other financial commitments, and time flexibility issues that can affect their availability to regularly attend scheduled classes) (Bellare et al., 2023; Coca et al., 2023; Hunte et al., 2020; Patterson, 2018). Fewer studies also have explored the unique strengths that adult learners bring to their postsecondary pursuits, such as their skills resulting from workforce involvement, classroom engagement, and goal-oriented nature (Kasworm, 2005, 2010).

Additional research has taken what has been found about adult learners—the barriers they face and their unique strengths—to study the specific practices that institutions employ to serve this important population of students. This includes examining practices such as offering credit for prior learning, which is especially supportive for veterans and those with extensive work experience (CAEL, 2025; Jiang et al., 2021). Other studies have examined the effectiveness and mechanisms of state policy initiatives such as “Reconnect” programs that recruit adult learners to (re)enroll, finding that such programs generally improve enrollment and retention (Collom et al., 2021; Person et al., 2020).

Adult learners of color are not well-represented in, and sometimes not included in samples for, existing research about (re)enrollment. Relevant literature that does explore the experience of adults of color focuses on economic, social, institutional and structural barriers to (re)enrollment (Chen, 2017; Hunte et al., 2020). Recent works have identified financial limitations, the absence of role models, and concerns about fitting school into work and other commitments as challenges for Black men enrolling as adult learners (Goings, 2018; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). Cultural barriers including migration status and language barriers may impact Hispanic adult learner (re)enrollment as well (Klein-Collins, 2020; Spellman, 2007). Building on this limited body of research focused on adult learners of color, this study seeks to explore factors that may enable (re)enrollment for adult learners of color.

College-Going Decision Making

Relatively less research has focused on understanding how adult learners make decisions about enrolling. The bulk of existing literature on college-going decision making focuses on college choice for younger learners (i.e., learners ages 18-24, often referred to as “traditionally aged” learners) as they transition from secondary education and make decisions about which college to attend (select examples include Niu & Tienda, 2008; Perna, 2006). These studies focus on “*college choice*,” presuming that students are concerned primarily with *where* to enroll versus *whether* to enroll.

Research only recently has begun to focus more on addressing an important question for adult learners, with a specific focus on adult learner perspectives and experiences, that has been relatively understudied: “*Should I (re)enroll?*” For example, Iloh’s (2019) Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories asserts that college-going decisions for adult learners are fundamentally different than traditional age learners. She argues that adult learners’ decisions are a function of time, information, 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). This model was relatively consistent with other recent work, which found time and resources to be key themes in determining (re)enrollment timing (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Malhotra & Apicerno, 2023; Means, 2025).

A previous study by AIR used the Iloh model to guide a qualitative study of (re)enrolled adult learners, which highlighted important practices that support adult learner enrollment and success such as improving affordability, program modality and flexibility, and proximity (Parsons et al., 2023). In addition, this study uncovered a key part of adult learners’ decision making process that has been underexplored in the literature: the role that learner ecosystems play in how they understand and perceive information about postsecondary education and ultimately make decisions about enrollment. For example, many participants described a friend, sibling, or even institution staff as—“information brokers”—who provided information or shared their own experiences at the right time, or even provided specific support for the process of obtaining information or applying to enroll that ended up being a key factor in these participants’ ability and decisions to enroll. While some studies have explored the role of information provision—for instance, examining outreach to adult learners by states or institutions via chatbots or institution staff (Person et al., 2020)—this brief highlights the importance of information and support drawn from the prospective learner’s existing ecosystem in influencing their (re)enrollment decisions.



The Role of Information Networks in Decision Making

Underscoring the importance of adult learners' ecosystems, sociologists who study human phenomena argue that social interactions, rather than individual characteristics, often drive behavior and decision making. From this perspective, the decision to enroll in college for adults could primarily be driven by social interactions rather than individual motivation, calculation, or belief (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Therefore, we use this concept to frame our methods for this study.

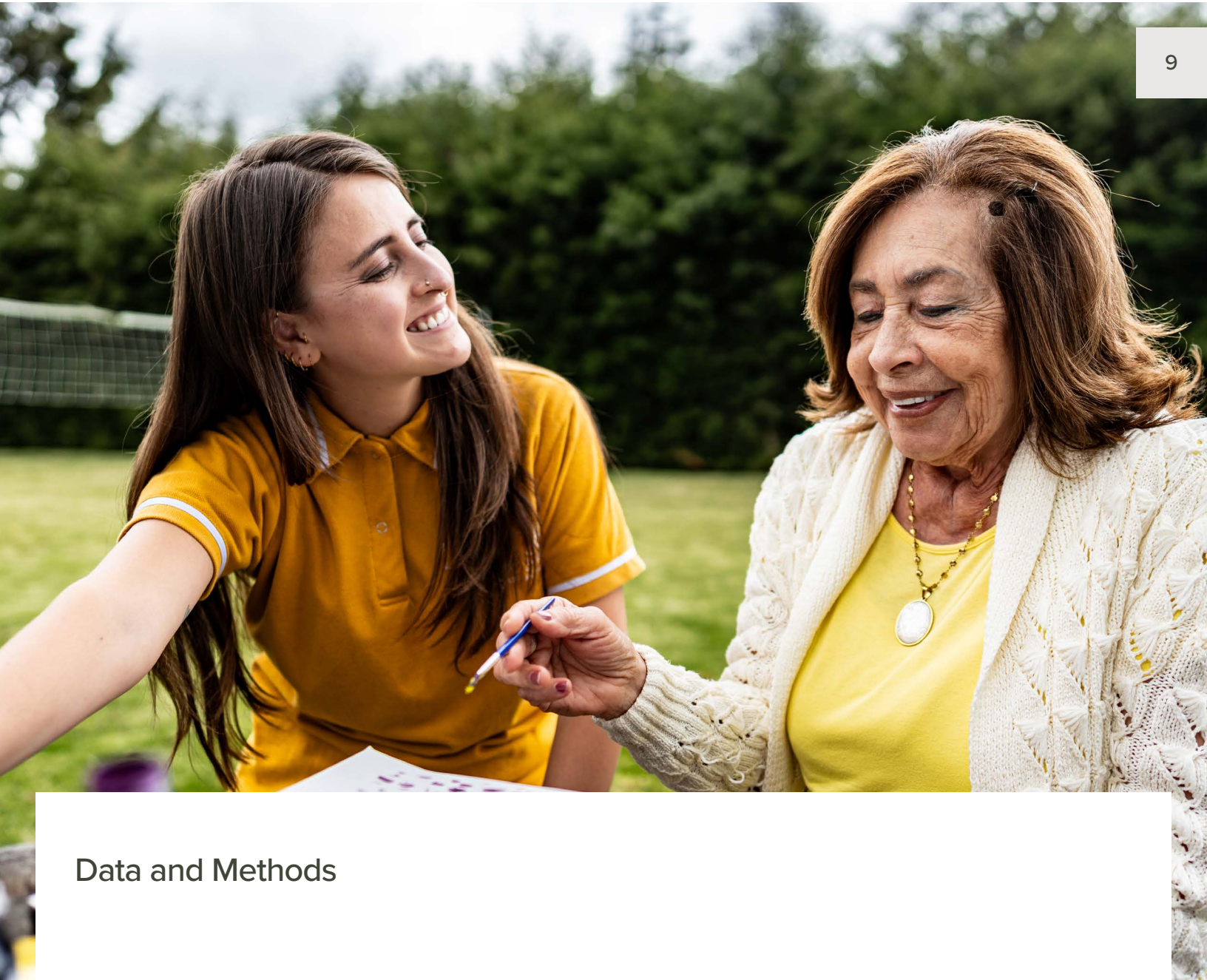
A network consists of a set of individuals and the relationships among them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The central argument of network research is that the networks within which individuals are embedded are more predictive of their actions than individual motivation or calculations (Perry et al., 2018). This idea about the influence of networks has been studied in a variety of areas, including healthcare (Cvetkovski et al., 2019), gambling behavior (Meisel et al., 2013), sports ticket purchases (Katz et al., 2020), and college student alcohol use (Russell et al., 2023). And research has shown that the influence of supportive relationships can mitigate social barriers and resource constraints, including in terms of accessing higher education (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). To date, however, no studies specifically investigate the role of information networks and supportive relationships in adult learners' college-going decisions.

Conceptualizing the Role of Information Networks in College-Going Decision Making: “Learners’ Ecosystems”

As described previously, for the purposes of this study, the learner’s “ecosystem” refers to the close people affecting and affected by a learner’s education journey and is an important factor in their decision-making process. These people may include family members, partners, friends, mentors, peers, colleagues, and other individuals that have close ties to the learner (See Exhibit 1). We conceptualize the learner’s ecosystem as a social network consisting of the learner and their ecosystem members; we then explore the ways that the experiences, expressions of support, personal stances, and perspectives that ecosystem members share with the learners shape their decisions. By applying network perspectives to learner ecosystems, we aim to uncover some of the levers that influence adults’ college-going decisions.

EXHIBIT 1. LEARNERS’ ECOSYSTEMS





Data and Methods

This study takes a mixed methods approach generally following a Convergent Parallel Design Approach, a method that involves both **quantitative** and **qualitative** components. In this approach, quantitative and qualitative data collection take place simultaneously, and both sets of data are interpreted together (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

- The quantitative component of this study involves an **egocentric network analysis (ENA)**, a form of social network analysis that maps connections from the perspective of a single person. In this case, we focused on understanding and mapping the network structure of adult learners' ecosystems.
- The qualitative component of the study included **semistructured interviews** to explore the content and nature of the interactions between the participating adult learners and their ecosystems. In this section, we describe each study component's methodological approach and sample.

Egocentric Network Analysis

The goal of the ENA was to examine the composition and structure of adult learners' ecosystems by identifying adult learners' ecosystem members, their characteristics, and the nature of the relationships between the learners and the ecosystem members. One of the primary strengths of this method is its ability to capture relational dynamics that might otherwise be overlooked in traditional surveys or interviews. By mapping out who the participants consulted with before enrolling in college, researchers can examine the *diversity* and *density* of their networks. Network diversity—measured by the variety of ecosystem members in the network in terms of age, occupation, or educational background—can reveal the breadth of perspectives influencing a learner's decision. Network density, on the other hand, reflects the interconnectedness of ecosystem members and can indicate whether the learner's decision-making environment is characterized by cohesive or fragmented advice (Borgatti et al., 2018).

The study team constructed a purposive sample using data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey to identify states and regions within states with large shares of adults with no college degree, as well as above-median shares of Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). We then partnered with postsecondary institutions and systems in those regions to recruit Black, Hispanic, and Native American adult learners ages 25–64. The final survey sample consisted of 36 adult learners who ranged in age from 27 to 57. Table 1 presents survey respondent characteristics.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

CHARACTERISTICS	COUNT
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	16
Hispanic	21
Native American	2
Gender	
Women	28
Men	5
Nonbinary	2
Postsecondary Experience	
Previously Enrolled	26
First generation student	27
Income	
Less than \$20,000	17
\$20,000 - \$29,900	6
\$30,000 - \$39,900	4
\$40,000 - \$49,900	4
\$50,000 - \$59,900	2
\$60,000 - \$69,900	1
\$70,000 - \$79,900	2
More than \$80,000	0
Total Respondents	36

**Note. The categories in the table are not mutually exclusive, so some totals may exceed the size of the sample*

After providing information about themselves, adult learner survey respondents (referred to as “egos”) received a “name-generator” question designed to elicit names of members of their ecosystems. Name-generator questions typically contain two components. First, egos are asked to provide the names of network members; for this study, egos were asked the following question related to their decision to enroll in college:

- **Please list the first name and first initial of the last name of all the people who you discussed the decision to enroll in college as an adult learner with.**

After participants listed the names of individuals with whom they discussed their decision to enroll in college (in network analysis, these individuals are called “alters”), each ego was asked a series of questions about each alter they named. These are commonly called “name-interpreter” questions. Name-interpreter questions in this survey included the following:

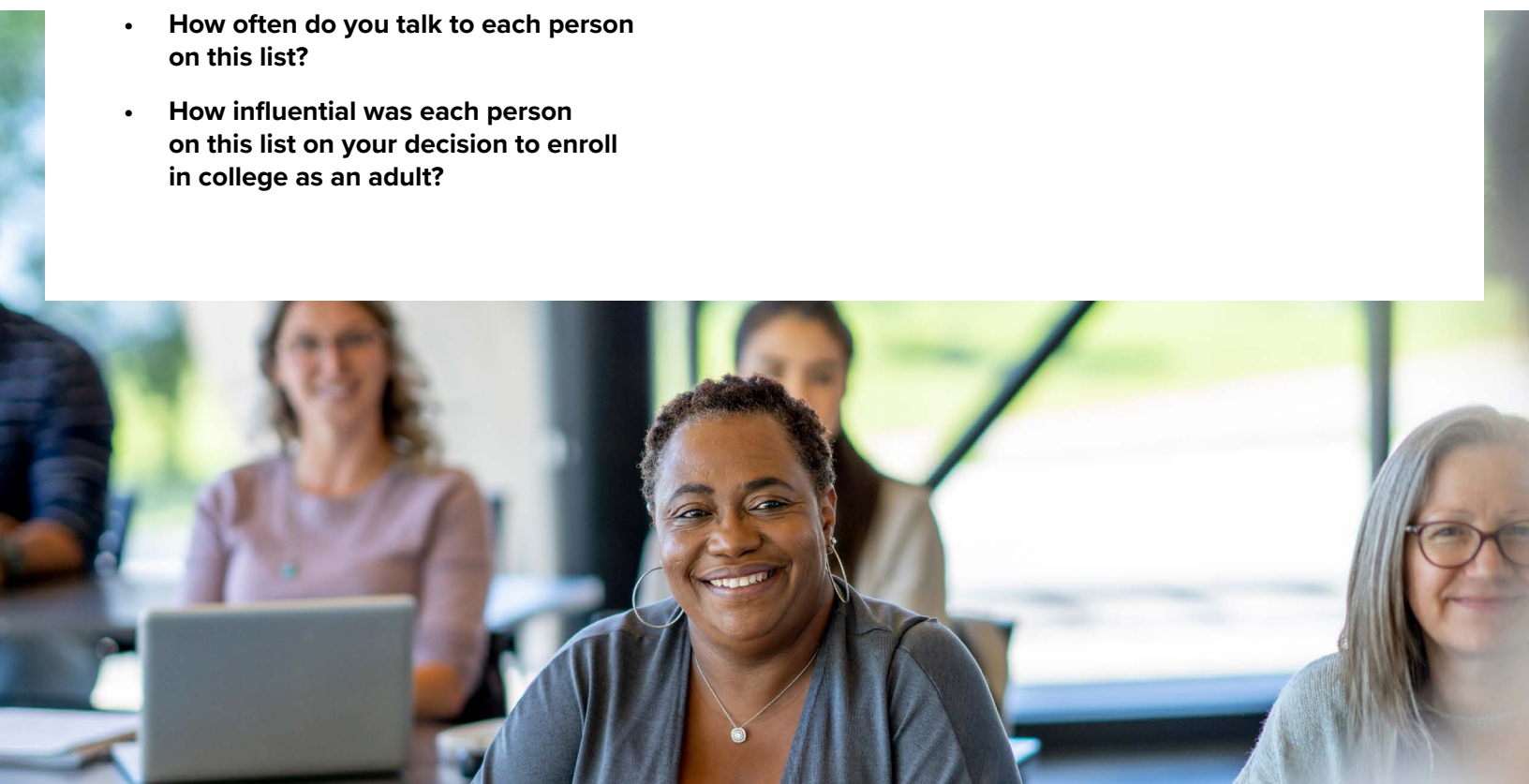
- **What is your relationship with each person on this list?**
- **What is the highest degree of each person on this list?**
- **How often do you talk to each person on this list?**
- **How influential was each person on this list on your decision to enroll in college as an adult?**

All questions in the name-interpreter section were answered using Likert scales with different values. (Please see Appendix A for details on each question.)

Lastly, survey respondents (egos) were asked to describe the nature of connections between the alters they named. These alter-alter ties help identify network patterns and are essential for calculating several structural measures of ego networks. In this study, egos were asked to do the following regarding each alter in their network:

- **Check the corresponding box if you believe the following people speak with each other independently of you.**

This question was repeated for each of the alters listed by an ego. The collection of these data formed the basis for measures of content, strength, function, and structure of ties in an ego’s network. This survey was designed and administered in Qualtrics.



Interviews

To complement the ENA findings, the qualitative component of the study sought to explore the nature of the interactions between adult learners and ecosystem members related to the learner's enrollment decision-making process. These interviews used the name generator and name interpretation questions from the surveys to contextualize each interview and encourage the interviewees to reflect on conversations that took place around the time of enrollment.

Interviewees were drawn from the pool of survey respondents via an invitation following survey completion to participate in a follow-up interview. Adult learner interviewees also were invited to refer members of the ecosystem to participate in the interviews. There were 25 total interviewees: 21 were adult learners and four were ecosystem members. Nineteen reported speaking to at least one member of their ecosystem, and two did not report speaking to anyone. All adult learner interviewees were enrolled at the time of the study. There were four additional ecosystem member interviews; given the relatively low number of ecosystem members participating, the analysis treated their contributions as exploratory while focusing primarily on the experiences and responses of the adult learners themselves. See Table 2 for more information about the interview participants.

We conducted one 60-minute semistructured interview with each interviewee. For interviews with adult learners, the interview first focused on the learner's actions during the period prior to their most current period of enrollment, such as how they gathered information on institutions and what they considered when gathering that information. Then, learners discussed what topics came up during their conversations with their ecosystem members about (re)enrollment and what input, feedback, and reactions their ecosystem members had. Learners who said they did not speak to any ecosystem members were asked questions about why they chose not to speak with anyone. At the conclusion of each interview, the learners were asked to refer a member of their ecosystem to the research team, which then invited the ecosystem member to participate in an interview. The ecosystem member interviews focused on their conversations and interactions with their adult learner including their opinions about, reactions to, and feedback on the learner's decision at the time as well as the ecosystem members' broader education experiences and opinions. All participants were provided with gift cards as a participant incentive and token of appreciation for the time dedicated to sharing their experiences for this study.



TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	RACE/ETHNICITY	LEARNER/ECOSYSTEM MEMBER
A	Not reported	Not reported	Hispanic	Ecosystem Member
Ali	48	Female	Hispanic	Learner
Bear	41	Male	Black/Hispanic	Learner
Bee	37	Female	Hispanic	Learner
David	39	Not reported	Hispanic	Learner
Denny	33	Male	Black	Learner
Diana	35	Female	Hispanic	Learner
Ellie	34	Female	Hispanic	Learner
Emiliano	55	Male	Hispanic	Learner
Hibiscus	34	Female	Black	Learner
Honey	31	Female	Black	Learner
Inspired	54	Female	Black	Learner
Isabella	48	Female	Hispanic	Learner
Janet	33	Female	Black	Learner
Jocelyn	31	Female	White/Hispanic/Native	Learner
Luna	34	Nonbinary	Black	Learner
Maia	Not reported	Not reported	Black	Ecosystem Member
Maria	30	Female	Hispanic	Learner
Micah	46	Female	Black	Learner
Oakland	Not reported	Not reported	Asian	Ecosystem Member
Sasha	41	Female	Black	Learner
Sophia	27	Female	Hispanic	Learner
Susie	35	Female	Hispanic	Learner
TJ	44	Female	Black	Learner
V	Not reported	Not reported	Black	Ecosystem Member

Learner Advisory Board

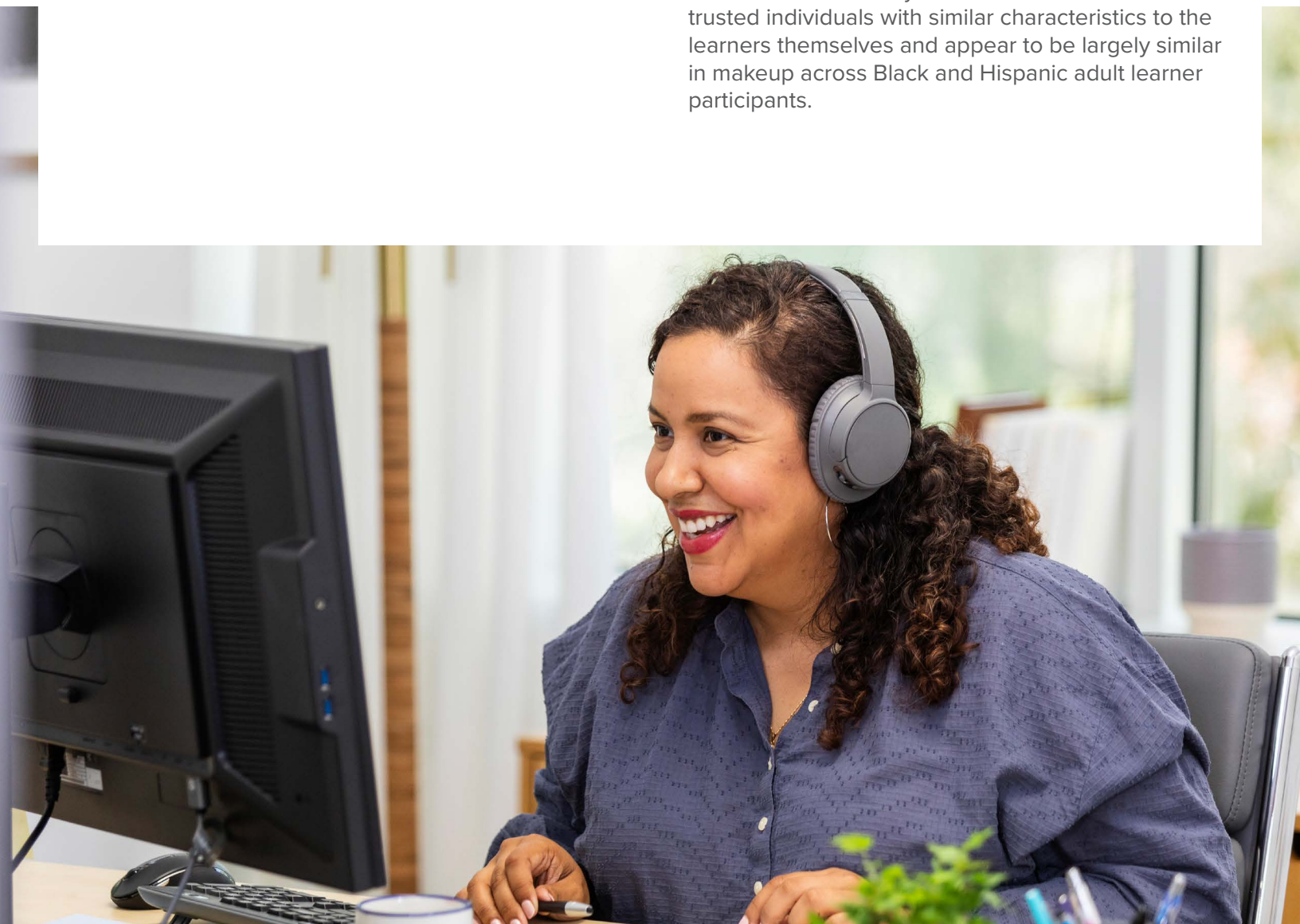
To ensure the quality of our work and accuracy of our interpretation, the research team engaged with four adult learners who participated in AIR's previous studies (Chicago Beyond, 2019). These adult learners were invited to engage in AIR's research design and implementation process at multiple steps, including reviewing data collection materials and aiding in recruitment efforts. During the analysis phase, they engaged with the research team in a series of collaborative working sessions, including a co-interpretation session, a process that brings researchers and members of the communities that are the subject of the research together to make sense of the data (AIR, 2021). This process aims to improve the quality and relevance of the findings, ensuring that the team considers multiple perspectives on how best to interpret the findings or important context in which to situate those findings. The members of the advisory board were compensated for their time.



Findings

This section presents our findings related to the composition of ecosystems as well as whether and how those ecosystems affected learners' (re)enrollment decisions. Throughout the section, we integrate the results of both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study.

At the highest level, this study finds that learners' ecosystems influence adult learners' decisions to (re)enroll. Generally, ecosystems did so by providing support to make (re)enrollment more feasible and attainable, including offering confidence-building encouragement or discussing and supporting the logistics of (re)enrolling. Rarely, though, did ecosystems provide advice about enrolling at specific institutions. The ecosystems consist of accessible and trusted individuals with similar characteristics to the learners themselves and appear to be largely similar in makeup across Black and Hispanic adult learner participants.



What are the characteristics of adult learners' ecosystems?

Adult learners' ecosystems were composed of trusted individuals from backgrounds that were similar to the learners', including those who had relevant experiences that they could share.

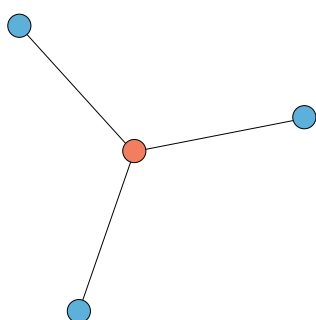
Ecosystem members overwhelmingly tended to be family members or partners, and learners frequently cited trusted relationships as a reason they chose to consult these people.

Ecosystem Composition

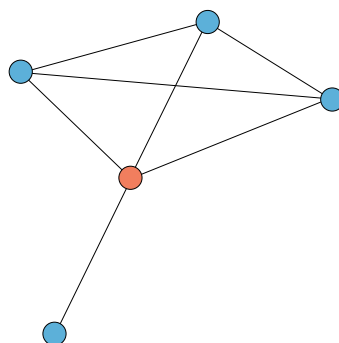
The 36 survey respondents in this study identified a total of 103 people with whom they engaged in conversations around their college-going decisions, whom we consider their ecosystem members. Ten survey respondents reported they did not speak to anyone regarding their college decisions, so they are recorded as having no ecosystem members.¹ On average, learners' ecosystems were made up of about three individuals (mean = 2.78; median = 3).

To understand how interconnected these networks were, we used a measure called network density, which measures the extent to which alters in a specific ecosystem were connected to each other outside of their mutual connection to the learner. A network density of zero means ecosystem members do not have connections independent of the learner, whereas a density of one means that all ecosystem members have connections with each other. Among survey respondents, the average network density was .497, meaning there was an even distribution of ecosystems with high levels and low levels of density. In other words, some ego participants had well-connected ecosystems, and others had dispersed ecosystems, suggesting that there is no singular pattern of how ecosystems are composed. Exhibit 2 presents sociograms (i.e., graphic representations of learners' ecosystems) that illustrate low, average, and high network density.

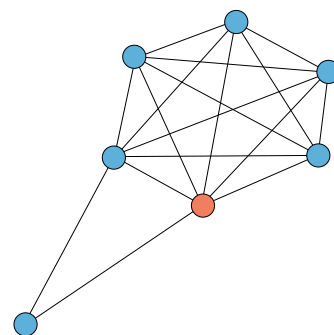
EXHIBIT 2. NETWORK DENSITY



Network Density: 0



Network Density: .5



Network Density: .73

¹However, the research team is skeptical that college going decisions are made with no influence or input from anyone.

We also sought to understand the types of individuals that were in learners' ecosystems. About half (48%) of the ecosystem members reported were family members, and an additional 25% were partners or spouses. That suggests the college (re)enrollment discussions are happening predominantly within learners' immediate families. Other types of relationships learners reported included friends, members of church communities, and mentor figures. This familiarity may lead to learners feeling more receptive to the opinions of their ecosystems. Research on network density also suggests, though, that it could indicate a similarity of opinions and perspectives (Pan, 2012). An ecosystem comprising individuals with similar opinions can prevent learners from being exposed to differing perspectives about their college-going decision.

Generally, people representing or affiliated with institutions were not part of most adult learners' discussions; only four ecosystem members, spread across four adult learners, were college faculty, staff, or administrators. Apart from those four learners, other interview respondents said members of their ecosystems did have some level of experience or knowledge of education systems, either as instructors, administrators, or learners themselves. It is not necessarily clear how or whether having ecosystem members with more direct experience or "insider" knowledge of college differentially affected the discussions or decisions made by adult learners, but having ecosystem members with such experience or information could, in theory, supplement any information that learners had not gathered on their own.

Learners' ecosystems tended to be racially homogeneous: that is, Black adult learners' ecosystems tended to be largely made up of other Black individuals, and Hispanic learners' ecosystems tended to largely comprise other Hispanics. One rationale suggested by interviews is that shared racial and cultural backgrounds create a mutual context for understanding their decisions and challenges. For instance, Susie, a 35-year-old Hispanic woman from Texas, consulted her sister, who was also navigating

higher education while balancing the responsibilities of being a mother and a wife. "She understands me," Susie noted, "like, the way I am and everything, and how I handle stress." Outside of racial homogeneity though, we found nothing to suggest any meaningful differences in the size, density, and types of individuals included in ecosystems across race/ethnicity. Mean and median network size, network density, and the proportion of family members and partners had no statistically significant difference across racial and ethnic groups, though the sample size limited our ability to analyze these differences.

Slightly less than a quarter (21%) of all ecosystem members had enrolled in college as adults themselves; in interviews, some of the adult learner interviewees confirmed that they preferred to speak with others with experience as adult learners. They described appreciation for hearing the perspectives of people with similar educational experiences and journeys, noting that it helped them navigate the transition into higher education and visualize their own progression toward earning a credential. For example, Janet, a 33-year-old Black woman from Georgia, shared her conversation with a family member who had had a similar experience:



[She's] been through the same exact steps that I'm taking. . . I think she was thirty-five . . . to become an attorney. . . I know that I wanted to get my master's, and I just want to get it all done at one time. And that's exactly what she did. So, hearing from her had a good impact, because she's been through the same thing.

Exploring the ecosystems' composition, particularly through the lens of network theories that help us understand how those ecosystem networks relate to each other and the learner, sets an important context for the critical question of whether ecosystems influence the adult learner's enrollment decisions. The prevalence of family members and partners as ecosystem members suggests that learners prioritized people who were accessible and trusted, and this may come at the expense of consulting with someone who has greater knowledge but may not be as trusted.

Do ecosystems influence adult learners' college-going decisions?

Generally, adult learners considered their ecosystem members influential in their decisions to (re)enroll, underscoring the importance of these relationships in informing this complex decision.

To understand whether ecosystems may have affected learners' college-going decisions, we asked survey respondents to rate how *encouraging* and, particularly, how *influential* their ecosystem members were. When adult learners were asked about the influence each of their network members had on their decision to go to college with values ranging from 1 ("not very influential") to 5 ("extremely influential"), the mean was 3.6. This suggests that, on average, network members had at least moderate influence on learners' decisions to (re)enroll in college. We also found that, overall, ecosystem members encouraged (re)enrollment. On a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 meaning "not encouraging" and 4 meaning "very encouraging," the mean among network members was 3.46. Of the 103 ecosystem members identified, 73% were "very encouraging" of the learners' (re)enrollment.

Although these findings suggest that such encouragement is a reason their consultation was so influential (further discussed in the next section about how ecosystems supported adult learners), this study did not uncover why the ecosystems were so encouraging. For instance, one explanation could be a social norm related to encouraging (re)enrollment in college, based on both the importance of supporting someone's efforts toward education, economic mobility, or self-improvement, particularly common in communities with less access to education historically (Immerwahr, 2004). Another explanation might be that adult learners may be pre-disposed to enrolling, and therefore only consulted people they thought may support, encourage, and endorse that decision. Interviews offered a few examples of this pattern; Sophia, a 27-year-old Hispanic woman from Texas, explicitly said she avoided speaking with certain family members because "*I knew they wouldn't understand why I was doing this at my age and would just discourage me.*" The study was not designed to uncover how widespread such explanations may be; each of these explanations may influence why ecosystems were viewed as supportive.

These ecosystems generally influenced learners' decisions and provided significant encouragement and support; the following sections will explore the mechanisms for that support.

How do adult learners' ecosystems influence the learner's college going decision making?

Interviews revealed that ecosystems' support for learners' decisions came in two forms: **mindset-oriented support**, like motivation and encouragement, or **capacity-oriented support** such as sharing information or resources to make (re)enrolling easier. The majority of our interviewees reported receiving both kinds of support from their ecosystems, possibly indicating the importance of both forms of support together. The following sections will explore the ways in which ecosystem support helps learners answer two key questions: **"Can I do this?"** and **"How do I do this?"**

Mindset

A majority of the support interviewees reported receiving from their ecosystem members appeared to help bolster the learners' mindsets around (re)enrollment, boosting their confidence in, and comfort with, their ability to succeed and ultimately earn a credential. In effect, this support helped the learner resolve the question in their head of **"Can I do this?"** Mindset support was reflected in words of encouragement and motivation for the learners, re-affirming their interest and intent to enroll. For example, Hibiscus, a 33-year-old Black woman from Georgia, described the encouragement she received from a mentor within her ecosystem:

 *And so like, she was helpful to me to like guide me and kind of like move past my like fears and doubts as far as my age of going back to school and not being able to like stay on track with everybody else.*

Some interviewees noted that their ecosystem members provided encouragement that motivated them to expand their horizons and broaden the realm of options they were considering, like Bear, a 41-year-old Hispanic man from California:

 *[My mentor is] really big in the, in, you know, trying to help people in prison. In fact, I had first seen him while I was in [a correctional facility], although I didn't know him at the time, but he would come in and teach. And, you know, he's the one who was like, "Why get a certificate, get a degree? You know, . . . we're gonna get you into [a western flagship public research university]. And so, you know, I spoke with him a lot during my time at [a western community college], and he's the one who really made me believe that I could do this path.*

Other words of affirmation seemed to help learners reorient their thinking about fitting college into their lives in ways that made it seem more doable. For instance, Sasha, a 41-year-old Black woman from Georgia, who shared how something her sibling said flipped her perspective a bit. Specifically, she explained how her sibling said ". . . at the end of the day you're going to be four or five years down the road anyway. Why not have your degree after those four or five years? Which is true and I didn't think about it that way."

Other learners did not share a specific comment that stood out per se; however, they said they received positive reinforcement on an ongoing basis, extending beyond their initial decision-making conversations into their ongoing educational journeys, which previous research has shown include continuous decisions about staying enrolled (Parsons et al., 2023). One participant's reflections illustrated this type of support, emphasizing how they received positive reinforcement throughout their journey:

 *My family kept celebrating even the small wins, like when I got my acceptance letter or registered for classes. Their excitement made me feel like I was doing something important, not just for me but for all of us.*

This mindset-oriented support encouraged learners to pursue (re)enrollment, validating their engagement in the decision-making process.

Capacity

Interviewees also shared ways ecosystem members provided support that was more concrete or tactical in nature. This support was geared toward enabling the learner to enroll by addressing some of the logistical barriers to enrollment, resolving the question “*How do I do this?*” This support included taking something off of their plates or providing information about navigating a particular process such as submitting applications, understanding financial aid, or selecting an academic program that best aligns with the learner’s career interest. As an example of sharing specific information, Honey, a 31-year-old Black woman from Michigan, reflected on how her younger sister drew from her own enrollment experience to provide:

 . . . *practical advice as far as I think, like what classes I would need when I got into the PSW program. If the classes were really hard, the internship part of it, because that’s what I was more interested in. And she gave me advice career wise on what I can work for on.*

A couple of participants had members of their ecosystems who represented organizations that aimed to provide support to aspiring learners; those members can be valuable if those resources are unavailable from a family member or friend. David, a 38-year-old Hispanic man from California, described how a community-based organization provided important practical guidance during his application process:

 *They start telling you about, like, the college(s) around, what college has the best ratings for whatever particular degree or path you want to follow. And they, like, they review your transcripts. They try to see which one, like, which classes you can potentially transfer or, like, how to, also how to, like, write your [personal statements].*

Other forms of capacity support also addressed transportation to and from campus, coordination around familial care, and planning around finances of enrollment, including immediate costs of the application process (e.g., application fees, transcript fees, outstanding balances), and the longer-term costs of attendance. Luna, a 34-year-old Black woman from Georgia, explained how she needed to coordinate with other family members to ensure the familial care she helped provide would be maintained upon her enrollment. And Maria, a 30-year-old Hispanic woman from Texas, talked about how her mother was very supportive: “*she was there, you know, always, she’s always saying, if you ever need a babysitter, you know, drop them off, you can study, you know, if your husband . . . comes home tired . . . you guys can drop the kids off here.*” Bee, a 37 year old Hispanic woman from California, discussed conversations she had with her partner where he said “*I’ll quit my job, I’ll get another job, you know, I’ll provide for us, we can co-parent the way that we are right now, like I’m your 100% support. Like I decided to, all right, we can do this.*” Providing learners with support and resources such as these can be very impactful, especially if support services provided by institutions are unavailable to them.

Patterns in Ecosystems' Support for Learners

Though both mindset and capacity-oriented support were important factors in learners' decisions to (re)enroll, interviewees more frequently shared examples of mindset-oriented support than capacity-oriented support. Although the analysis cannot reveal the specific reasons for this pattern, a likely explanation is that capacity-oriented support requires more from the ecosystem member. For example, offering words of encouragement may be more feasible than providing transportation to and from campus a few times a week.

These categories of mindset and capacity support are not mutually exclusive; actions can bolster a learner's mindset around enrollment and provide capacity support that enables them to enroll. For example, Inspired, a 45-year-old Black woman from Georgia, highlighted how their pastor rallied the congregation to help raise money for tuition, providing both encouragement and tangible financial support:

"He told everyone about my situation, and people donated to help me cover my first semester. It was incredible to see how much they believed in me."

Capacity-oriented support also can serve as a vote of confidence in the learners' ability to earn a credential. In turn, that support boosts the learner's attitude in pursuing their own goals.

Finally, the analysis identified no discernible pattern or correlation between what type of learner is more likely to need or receive a certain type of support, or what ecosystem member relationship (e.g., family, partner, friend) is more likely to provide a particular type of support. Several social factors such as socioeconomic status or cultural practices may influence what types of support ecosystems provide to their learners and what forms that support will take, but such questions would be important to address in future research.





Discussion and Future Research

This section highlights areas we were unable to address in our findings, as well as opportunities for future research to build on this work in ways that will further support efforts by institutions and others to support adult learners in (re)enrolling.

Influence of Institutional Practices

One of the early questions this study sought to address was whether and what supports or services an institution offers are a focus of the conversations between adult learners and their ecosystem members about their decision making. For instance, we wanted to understand whether learners reported conversations with their ecosystems about how they might make an institution's evening classes work, or whether they sought advice about how to engage with people or offices on campus that might support their journey. Generally, we found little evidence to suggest that specific institutional practices, supports, or services were part of these conversations. In the few examples where this was shared, most involved ecosystem members acknowledging the presence of a particular academic program that would likely be of interest to the learner. As an example of the rare instance where this occurred, a sibling of Sophia (a 27-year-old Hispanic woman from Texas) informed her of an elementary education program at the local community college that had a paid teaching residency requirement, an example of an affordability strategy coming up in conversation.

The relatively low-occurrence discussions between learners and their ecosystems, focused on what specific institutions offered and their practices or supports for students, may not mean that what institutions provide is unimportant to learners' decisions. Rather, it might be that adult learners turn to their ecosystem members for more general support and guidance when it comes to their overall decision about whether to (re)enroll. For example, those encouraging the learner to enroll by motivating them to pursue their goals may not see a reason to get into the specifics of any one institution. Another possible reason: Individuals with limited or no experience with postsecondary education or the institution that interests the learner may be unaware of specific practices or characteristics of institutions that might be helpful to adult learners. Generally, although we find that institutional characteristics and practices are not part of these conversations, we cannot conclude that they do not matter—just that they are not a key focus of the advice and information these adult learners sought and received from their ecosystem members.

Focusing on Enrolled Adult Learners

By design, this study could not address a key question: whether ecosystems mattered differently for learners who decided to enroll versus adults who considered it but ultimately did not decide to enroll or had not yet decided to enroll. More specifically, our study only sampled currently enrolled adult learners. The primary reason for this decision was the desire to engage in an appreciative inquiry of this process for learners who did decide to enroll, as opposed to a more critical, and potentially deficit-based, framing arising from comparing learners who chose to enroll with learners who did not. This framing has impacted this analysis, missing voices of prospective learners as well as an absent comparison group.

As such, the findings from this study may not reflect the decision-making processes of prospective adult learners who have considered enrolling but have not yet opted to do so. We found that the members of learner ecosystems that they turn to in making (re)enrollment decisions are influential and overall highly supportive of adult learners' interest in enrolling, but we cannot answer whether that would be different for learners who were not enrolled. Would prospective learners report their ecosystems as being less supportive and/or less influential? Would those ecosystem members demonstrate similar levels of supportiveness, but an entirely different set of factors, that would lead prospective learners to not enroll? Or, would those ecosystem members provide support different in nature from the mindset and capacity-oriented support noted earlier, and would that difference lead to a different college-going enrollment decision? These are important questions relevant to understanding how best to motivate and support adult learners who might not yet consider (re)enrollment as an option or who have not yet gained the encouragement or practical types of supports they need to feel confident in their ability or the feasibility of pursuing a college credential. We encourage future research to consider these types of questions and explorations.

KEY FINDINGS:

For adult learners opting to (re)enroll in college, we found that, for nearly all of them, their **ecosystems, or close networks of trusted individuals, played influential roles**. These ecosystems typically shared some common characteristics:

- Adult learners' ecosystems were made up of trusted individuals from backgrounds similar to the learners' and had relevant experiences to share.
- Adult learners found their ecosystem members influential in their decisions to (re)enroll.
- Ecosystems support for learners took two forms: mindset-oriented support, like motivation and encouragement, or capacity-oriented support, like sharing information or resources to make (re)enrolling easier.





Implications

Understanding the ways ecosystems influence adult learners' decision making is important to provide context for interventions or outreach about enrollment that often focus specifically on adult learners themselves without engaging their ecosystems as well. These findings highlight the importance of considering the role of learners' ecosystems in their decision making across all the ways an institution might reach, engage with, or influence a prospective adult learner. As ideas for starting points, we offer the following practical considerations for practitioners at institutions or nonprofit organizations interested in supporting the college (re)enrollment decisions of adult learners:

- 1. Consider outreach and support specific to addressing logistical barriers and to reinforcing college-going mindsets.** Institutions can target outreach and support that supplements the types of encouragement and support offered by their ecosystem members. For example, if learners' ecosystem members tend to provide them with significant mindset-oriented encouragement but less logistical support about the process of enrolling and attending, then institutions could attempt to reduce some of the logistical barriers and concerns adults have that prevent them from deciding to (re)enroll. To address these barriers, institutions can take the following steps:
 - Simplify application and financial aid processes (which adult learners often cite as barriers to enrollment) and transparently communicate adult learner-specific options and opportunities, like alternative admissions pathways or recognition of prior learning in plain language. Or, if an institution is open to deeper changes, improving logistical support can include offering childcare programs or more flexible courses and/or programs.
 - Use practical and flexible messaging, including transparent information about financial aid and costs, as well as strategies for managing schedules and the range of responsibilities adult learners have within and outside of college.
 - In terms of mindset-oriented encouragement, consider ways that their own faculty, staff, and processes send messages to adult learners. Review whether those messages are encouraging and growth-oriented.

2. Place staff and other adult learners in positions to support learners through enrollment and beyond.

AIIR's previous research demonstrated that (re)enrollment is not a singular decision point; adult learners make ongoing decisions about whether to stay enrolled and how they might persist in their education journey. Even if learners talk about the decision with their ecosystem members prior to enrollment, institutions might consider the kinds of ongoing encouragement, motivation, or capacity/logistical support that learners might need to stay enrolled and complete their studies. For learners who may not have a supportive ecosystem, or even for those whose ecosystems are supportive but have limited experience in postsecondary education, identifying areas where institution staff or other adult learners can become de facto members of an ecosystem for learners to lean on can provide the additional support learners may need to persist. For example, institutions can take the following steps:

- Consider creating coach or mentor roles with a specific focus on supporting adult learners, offering tailored training for those roles, which can be especially supportive for adult learners that may experience unanticipated challenges or changes in their lives that might affect whether they feel equipped to stay enrolled.
- Leverage social networks on campus and in online spaces to keep adult learners engaged through ongoing mentorship, peer support, and alumni involvement.

3. Build on learners' existing social capital and identify opportunities to supplement it.

This study highlights many ways that learners brought their own forms of social capital and support from their community to their enrollment decisions and journey. Institutions can consider ways to address the social capital that adult learners may not have, especially because institutions often create the barriers that make certain kinds of social capital valuable. In particular, institutions can do the following:

- Ensure that adult learners have access to relevant and tailored information about degree programs, financial aid, and support services at the institution.
 - Build support networks for adult learners to foster a sense of belonging and shared support, which could include cohort models in which adult learners move through programs together or offices where adult learners can connect even when they do not share classes.
- ## 4. Intentionally develop the institution's reputation and image in the local community to reach adult learners.
- All participants expressed a level of familiarity with the institution they ultimately decided to enroll at during our interviews. Some learners had direct experience with the institution because they had previously enrolled there. Some learners had ecosystem members with experience with the institution, whereas others who had no direct connection still described familiarity with the institution's reputation in that community. From this perspective, word of mouth can be a valuable tool to help attract adult learners. To more effectively engage with adult learners in local communities, institutions can do the following:
- Ensure that faculty, staff, learners, and community members have positive experiences and interactions associated with the institution.
 - Leverage alumni networks to share adult learner success stories and make connections with prospective adult learners.
 - Engage with organizations in the community in which people might engage with trusted community members or peers. Consider partnering with employers and industry leaders that have a strong community presence, or working with local organizations, churches, and workforce development entities.

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Appendix A.

Methods Technical Details: Egocentric Network Analysis

Analysis

Analysis of the data collected for this study was conducted using the **egor** package in R. After retrieving and cleaning respondent data from Qualtrics, an **egor** object was created to facilitate the manipulation and analysis of variables. This process ensured that both ego and alter attributes, as well as alter–alter ties, were properly structured for network analysis. Summary statistics for all study participants were calculated for both continuous and categorical variables, capturing key characteristics of egos, alters, and their interconnections. Once summary statistics were obtained for the full dataset, individual ego networks were visualized and analyzed to further explore the structural properties of each network. Specifically, we examined variables such as network size, network density, efficiency, and restraint, which provided insights into the overall connectivity and relational patterns within each ego network. These measures allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals' personal networks were structured and how they functioned within the broader dataset.

Recruitment and Incentives

Survey respondents, upon expressing interest in participating in the study, were provided with an intake form to confirm eligibility, after which eligible participants were provided with a survey link. To ensure we received sufficient data for both the egocentric network analysis, a social network analysis technique that maps connections from the perspective of a single person and the interviews, we required learners to have spoken with an ecosystem member about college to complete the survey. Only interested respondents who indicated they spoke with a member of their ecosystem on the intake form received a survey link. Survey respondents who completed the survey received a \$25 Amazon gift card for their participation.

Appendix B.

Methods Technical Details: Interviews

Analysis

To conduct the analysis, the research team conducted a thematic analysis, a qualitative analysis method used to surface recurrent patterns in the interview data. The thematic analysis looked to identify themes specifically related to the learner reflections on their college-going decisions and their interactions with identified ecosystems members which were reflected in an a priori codebook. The analysis team engaged in calibration activities prior to coding the transcribed interviews using NVivo, proceeded to code the interviews, then produced a series of analytic memos that were synthesized into the findings for this study.

Incentives

At the conclusion of each adult learner interview, the interviewees received \$50 Amazon gift cards and were asked to refer a member of their ecosystem to the research team, who then invited the ecosystem member to participate in an interview. The ecosystem member interviewees received \$50 Amazon gift cards for their participation, and adult learners who referred an ecosystem member that went on to complete an interview received an additional \$25 Amazon gift card.



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